

SPECIAL SUPER ISSUE! 16 ADDITIONAL PAGES!

Asian Cult Cinema

INSIDE THIS ISSUE: Kiyoshi Kurosawa interview • Danny Lee: HK's Super Cop
Asia's Greatest Action Divas • Kamen Rider AND MUCH MORE

Number 26 \$6

could slightly higher
outside of USA



Will The Real Godzilla Stand Up Please?
first look at Japan's new

Godzilla 2000: Millennium





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Front: Godzilla returns to Japan in *Godzilla 2000: Millennium*
 Back cover: HK actresses Amy Yip and Ha Chia Ling from
 the newly restored, fully uncut *Erotic Ghost Story* (1990)

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Issue #26 1st Quarter 2000

ASIAN CULT CINEMA

Editorial from Thomas Weisser

I was personally criticized by Brett Garten in the Letters Column of the previous ACC for my "misogynistic obsessions." The writer complained about my apparent "sexual dysfunction... of getting pleasure out of the rape and torture of women" singling me out as "an Oedipal woman-hater." I didn't – and I won't – take time to directly respond such a ludicrous accusation. My daughter (upon reading that letter) said to me: "This guy doesn't know you at all... Yuko and I are the two most important people in your life. And we're women." I couldn't have said it any better. So, Brett Garten, take her comment and stick it up your ass.

All right then, so if – in fact – I'm not an *Oedipal woman-hater*, why does my magazine give so much space to the Asian sex films? And, even more specifically, why would I authorize an ACC investment of more than \$100,000 to become the North American distributor of Nikkatsu Pink Films? The answer— I **love the films**. I don't necessarily love the message nor the morality (i.e., lack of morality) of the movies. But I **do** love and appreciate the productions themselves, and the people – performers and filmmakers – who make them happen. Here's a left-field example: I like *The Lords Of Acid* and often find myself listening to their music. I'm not attracted to the group's call for "all night grinders" nor their "rough sex" tirades. Rather, I like *sound and production of The Lords*; I enjoy the multi-dimensions of their music... the booming bottom-end, the voice-as-an-instrument drone, and the intricate counter-rhythms. One doesn't have to "sit on acid" to appreciate the genius behind their brand of mayhem, sexually abusive or not.

As of January 1st, *Asian Cult Cinema* became Nikkatsu's distributor in North America. Lots of movies are now available in the USA for the very first time. Yes, some of these films are offensive, many are obscene, but all of them are worth seeing. I am proud to have made this commitment on behalf of the magazine. Yuko and I thank you for your support.

Now, sit back and enjoy another issue of ACC. This one is bigger and better than ever (16 additional pages!). You can be the first person on your block to find out about the new Japanese Godzilla 2000. Read on.

Note: The next issue of ACC
will ship in April. Remember we
have our own website:
www.asiancult.com.
Check it for clips from all
our Nikkatsu releases!





I recently had the opportunity to see *Evil Dead Trap* in a theater – once again – when it played our home town of Miami (*Alliance Theater*). Even though I've seen Toshiharu Ikeda's masterpiece-of-a-movie far too many times already, nothing compares to seeing it in the opulence of the big screen.



Asian Cult Cinema REPORT

FILM, NEWS AND GOSSIP

Hopefully, by now, many of you have also had the same experience.

You may recall – a year ago – I told you that ACC had purchased the rights to the film and that we were circulating it throughout the

U.S. and Canada, "roadshow" fashion (city by city, theater by theater). Since *Evil Dead Trap*'s premiere at L.A.'s Nuart Theater in September of '98, the cult shocker has played successfully in many cities from San Francisco to Cambridge, from Toronto to Chicago.

However, if this contemporary Japanese horror opus has not graced your city, it's time to tell the manager of the hippest theater in your area to get off his ass and book it! Any theater interested in playing *Evil Dead Trap* (35 mm, English subtitles) should call **ACC Releasing** at (323) 651-1599 on the West Coast.

And speaking of *Evil Dead Trap*...

By now, I'm sure you're sick and tired of seeing all those millennium lists—the *Best (this or that) Of The Century* articles which have proliferated most every magazine and newspaper in the marketplace for many months. But allow me indulge your patience one more time.

Noted Italian critic Piero Scaruffi published his *1000 Best Movies of All Time* in the *Roma Newspaper* (also avail-

able for scrutiny on the web at WWW.scaruffi.com/cinema/best100.html).

This is a most impressive list (topped by *Citizen Kane*, of course) containing an array of films from all over the world. Significantly, *Evil Dead Trap* is listed among the honored movies... and rated higher than such American horror classics as *Nightmare On Elm Street*. Director Toshiharu Ikeda is one of three Japanese filmmakers represented on Scaruffi's list.



Often, in this column, I've written about the volatile Asian theatrical business. Numerous times, I've mentioned how the deadly financial climate of the Orient has affected their movie industry. But as 1999's ended, many countries – with the conspicuous exception of Hong Kong – reported major gains. According to a report in *Variety*, the Asian Pacific region showed major signs of stability in the theatrical motion picture arena.

Previously – in 1998 – Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines had registered a minus 9.8% slump. However, 1999 shows a 1.4% growth, with a prediction of 3.6% for 2000.

The Japanese economy still remains sluggish, but theater attendance is up

and the number of screens continues to grow at a surprising rate, especially in the suburbs. The fact is – even in the middle of Japan's recession – four films managed to pass the \$100 million mark (including *Princess Mononoke* which, at \$165 million, became the largest grossing movie in Japan's history). According to the *Motion Picture Producers Association of Japan*, the box office grew by 9.2% last year

to a record high of 1.93 billion dollars. Among the top grossing films of the year, the second *Pokemon* movie, *Ken Takakura's Railroad Man (Tetsudo-in)*, a banking-scandal film called *Jubaku*, and a yet another sequel to the popular horror flick *Ring* [incidentally, *Ring* is now up to 5 entries – causing much confusion stateside; ACC will offer an indepth report on the series in the next issue]. Of course, American movies always draw large audiences in Japan. The biggest foreign moneymakers in 1999 were *Armageddon* and *The Matrix*.

On the flip side of the coin, the movie business in Hong Kong continues to spiral downward. The industry reports less screens today than anytime in the past 40 years. The HK boxoffice has been on a steady decline since 1992. After the Chinese takeover in July of 1997, the business suffered an even more dynamic





Tetsu Ishii's Hell was the big but controversial hit of Japan's Holiday season. AOC has scheduled an interview with Ishii. Watch for it in an upcoming issue.

nosedive. While 1998 was called an "all time low," 1999 turned out to be even worse, with ticket sales dropping another 18%.

Entertainment analysts claim widespread piracy is the main reason for the steady decline. "Illegal DVDs and VCDs are robbing the industry of 20-30% of its gross," says Christopher Shaw of the *Shaw Bros* organization. To date, the government has done nothing to regulate the problem. But the industry has tried to convince people to stop supporting the bootleggers. For example, on March 17th, **Jackie Chan** led 1500 protesters through Mongkok Alley – the hotbed of the illegal disc blackmarketing – while Hong Kong's 73 movie theaters went dark for a day to show their support.

Despite all the doom and gloom, a few movies did burst out of Hong Kong to make money in 1999. Among them were the very successful *Gen-X Cops*, directed by **Benny Chan** and *Sylvia Chang's Tempting Heart*. Yet, the biggest movie of the year wasn't a Hong Kong film at all. Japan's *Ring* won the top box office honors in '99 in HK.

In a related story (see photo on bottom of previous page), the Chinese Filmmakers Association was host to a Peking Film Festival celebrating the movies of **Akira Kurosawa**. Amazingly, this was the first time the movies – *Seven Samurai*, *Red Beard* and *Sanjuro* – had been permitted an audience in Red China. The festival traveled to the major Chinese cities during 1999.

The *Disney Corporation* is notorious for their sledgehammer assaults against anyone suspected of 'infringement on their intellectual properties.' For many years, stories have circulated about legal busts against everything from nursery schools to bakeries due to 'unauthorized depiction of a Disney character.'

When Yuko and I were recently in Japan, we saw a couple singular examples of 'unMickys' (i.e., obvious Mickey Mouses altered to avoid lawsuits) used by Japanese businesses:



Callophone wrapping for an octopus flavored snack-shop called Takobue. Notice how Mickey lost his ears and gained tentacles.

It's anybody's guess why this Japanese unMickey is eating his ears; photo of banner at a Trade Expo in Toyama.





Blood Spattered Hero in Hollywood

A COLUMN BY

Wyatt Doyle

REPORTING FROM THE
HEART OF BABYLON

Let's talk about your first time.

It's nothing to be embarrassed about. Everyone starts somewhere. So what was it like for you? Did it make you uncomfortable? Was it funny? Was it depressing? Did you laugh? Were you still not sure exactly how you felt about the whole thing once it was over?

It's a safe bet that whatever your preconceptions were, when it was over you suddenly realized there was a whole world out there you'd never even considered.

And it made you think, didn't it? And you wanted more.

Of course we're talking about *pinku eiga*, and the good news is, the motherlode has arrived at last. ACC has released a broad and diverse selection of *Pink Films* (over 50!) complete with English subtitles.

Ah, yes. *Pinku eiga*. 'Roman-Porn.' Their relative inaccessibility until now has made them a hotly debated – if rarely seen – topic of discussion for fans of Asian Cinema. What's more, at last we scholars of the medium have the opportunity to actually know what we're talking about, as opposed to just seeming like we do.

The importance of these releases cannot be overstated, as the release of *Pink Films* in the United States marks the first concerted effort to introduce what is more than simply a genre or new school of film; it's the first Western introduction to a heretofore unseen WORLD of cinema.

And love them or loathe them, it is an undeniable fact that these releases are THE Asian Cinema event of the new year. Care to argue the point? Bring your boxing gloves.

Sure, every culture on the globe has quietly spent a good deal of its creative energies and resources arguing, analyzing and immortalizing sex in one form or another, from high art to low. But Japan – Japan! – is perhaps the only culture to establish and maintain an entire approach to cinema devoted to the study. And perhaps more importantly, their cinematic explorations (and exploitations) of sex and sexuality are delivered with a mind-boggling warts-and-all candor that in most cultures never emerges beyond the realm of still-life or literature – it at all.

I'm frequently asked if the outrageous quality of most *Pink Films* can be attributed to the popular perception of Japan as a notoriously repressed country. The short answer? Probably. But Japanese culture is also famous for being direct, and there's a strong case that the in-your-face qualities of *pinku eiga* are also a result of a culture that knows what it wants... and wants entertainment that delivers it with no excuses.

Which is not to suggest these films are in any way without art, or some Pacific Rim variation on the sleaze found in the back room of the local video store; far from it. *Pinku eiga* were produced by the leading lights of Japanese cinema, whether young directors establishing

Wyatt Doyle is a former line-producer for Warner Brothers & Paramount Studios; today he lives and works in Hollywood, where he writes and lectures on world popular culture.

ASIAN CULT CINEMA presents the

Nikkatsu Collection



The pink industry has been the birth place for many directors and performers — the arena where they developed and nurtured their craft. Now the United States can finally see and appreciate these Japanese Sex Films, the genre created from my country's passion.

— Naomi Tani

Nikkatsu Pink Films are imported from Japan by Asian Cult Cinema

All videos are presented in VHS NTSC (American) format;
original widescreen theatrical versions; HiFi Stereo sound;

full color cover artwork; in Japanese language with English subtitles

The mallorder price for any Nikkatsu video is \$39.95

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THE NIKKATSU COLLECTION IS INTENDED FOR ADULTS ONLY

their careers to seasoned talents attracted by the tremendous creativity and freedom Pink offered. Consequently there is no such thing as a 'typical' Pink Film; the only generalization the films support is that they're about sex. And like good sex, Pink is at its best when its out of control.

Which, fortunately, is most of the time.

I recently had the opportunity to sample releases from Asian Cult Cinema's *Nikkatsu Collection*. There are some titles you need to know about:

THE WOODS ARE WET

directed by Tatum Kumashiro

On the run from an accusation of murder, a terrified young woman is picked up by a wealthy innkeeper's wife who seems genuinely touched by the girl's desperation. She is invited to stay with the lady and her husband at the hotel, as their guest. But things quickly take a turn for the nasty when the sadistic innkeeper boasts to his guest of his plan to rob and murder two hunters who have taken a room at the hotel – and he plans to do this purely for his own pleasure.

Warn them, he tells her. Tell them they are in great danger if they stay the night. If she can convince them to go, she'll be free to leave with them. Reluctantly the girl agrees. He dispatches her to her task – but first strips her. And when the hunters become too preoccupied with pleasures of the flesh to heed her warnings, the fate of all three are sealed...

The Woods Are Wet is a notable film on a number of levels. The use of unusual lighting adds immeasurably to the atmosphere, turning the quaint hotel into a foreboding place of menace, with rich blue light spilling out through heavy black shadows in the halls. Frenetic scenes of physical assault are punctuated by sharp, sudden lighting changes which add a nightmarish intensity to the sequences.

Its plotting is no less skillful. Director Kumashiro doesn't follow the expected



narrative path of a girl's capture and subsequent efforts to escape, but instead elects to focus his considerable skills on character study, with a strong focus on the steady disintegration of his heroine's morality. It is both horrifying and fascinating to watch the decadent antagonists weave ethical traps to twist and break down their guest's morality to serve their nefarious ends.

The film is credited as based on the *Marquis DeSade's Justine*, but the adaptation is liberal, and Kumashiro uses the source material more as a springboard to a narrative with similar but very different concerns. Where *Justine* deals with an innocent girl's stoic efforts to cling to faith and hope in the face of extreme cruelty and bizarre violations of the world at large, *The Woods Are Wet* presents a more complex scenario. The protagonist's innocence is voiced but never definitely established. While we're given little to suggest that she is actually guilty of a murder, Kumashiro never definitely confirms her innocence. By the film's conclusion, we're forced to ask: is the protagonist a victim of these sadistic murderers, or an accomplice? Is she a prisoner, or has she instead finally found the place where she belongs?

It's a troubling question; but then uncertainty and discomfort are very much the point of the exercise. The woods are wet, the title tells us, but whether it's wet with tears or anticipation is a distinction Kumashiro leaves to the viewer.



PLEASURE CAMPUS: SECRET GAMES
directed by Tatsumi Kumashiro

If Kumashiro had only made dark, challenging films such as the forementioned *Woods Are Wet*, his reputation would still be assured. But the fact that the same director could successfully pull off a film as frenetic – as preposterous – as comically offensive as *Pleasure Campus* suggests his work is in need of careful and serious attention.

Where *Woods Are Wet* builds with a dark, deliberate intensity, the comedy *Pleasure Campus* moves at a breakneck pace; it might just be the fastest-moving film ever made. Its steady parade of hysterical, over-the-top caricatures of hypocritical authority figures tear across the screen, decrying the sorry state of the nation's 'Inso-

lent youth,' all the while verbally and physically attacking any hapless student unable to get of the way fast enough. The film is based on the successful manga series of the same title, and perhaps more than any other comic adaptation, Kumashiro truly captures the gonzo spirit and pacing of the source medium.

The film has been compared to Terry Southern and Mason Hoffenberg's equally outrageous satirical novel *Candy*, and the comparison is a *mild* one. Both works target similar strains of hypocrisy, and both feature a hapless heroine who finds herself in one sexual misadventure after another. But whereas *Candy* was motivated by a benevolent but misguided compulsion to 'share' herself with those she perceived to be in need, *Pleasure Campus*' poor Sachiko just can't seem to escape her molesters no matter how hard she tries.

That the film is in incredibly poor taste can hardly be denied; but neither can the film's bizarre manic genius.

INVISIBLE MAN: RAPE!
directed by Isao Hiyashi

Our hero, the hapless Ipppei, is a *Nutty Professor*-style lab assistant who unwittingly stumbles upon an invisibility serum. Naturally, he sets off to fulfill his

Invisible Man: Rape!



wildest fantasies – ravishing his sexy and inexperienced sister-in-law, romping at the local baths, introducing his lesbian boss to the unexpected joys of heterosexuality, and reinvigorating his tired marriage in the process!

Despite the title's screaming promise of RAPE!, bear in mind this isn't exactly *The Accused*; a better frame of reference might be the comic bovine sodomy of the *Zucker Bros' Top Secret*. Dopey, sexy and fun, *Invisible Man* is exactly what you might expect from such a premise. Those with a taste for the juvenile can't help but laugh at the film's freewheeling celebration of stupidity – particularly the hilarious special effect of a very visible condom bopping in midair as we follow Ipppei's night of invisible sexual mayhem. Indeed, as one critic has said of the film, "It's the invisible man movie you might have made if you were ten years old."

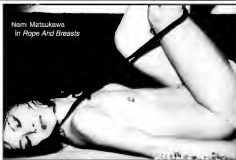
Ten year-olds among us take note.

ROPE AND BREASTS

directed by Masaru Konuma

Although she's a successful sex club performer billed as the *Queen Of S&M*, Sayo wants a change. Dissatisfied with the theatrical bondage of her live performances and feeling the relationship with her manager/boyfriend Isao is going nowhere, she decides to abandon her lover and career after her next show. But first the pair agree to a proposition from wealthy fan Kenzo and his randy wife, who seek a private performance in their elaborate home dungeon. But when the practiced performance proves unreward-

Naomi Matsukawa
in *Rope And Breasts*



ing, the evening evolves into a more extreme – and dangerous side of sadism...

Even here among a school of bizarre cinema, *Rope And Breasts* is an odd duck – a sex film that deals less with satisfaction than it does frustration, and ultimately allows its characters little more than resignation and a kind of pragmatic acceptance of their lives.

For all its graphic and aggressive sexuality (there's quite a bit), the heart of the film isn't in the bondage and abuse. In fact, the conflicting desires of the involved parties serve only to illuminate the frustrating emotional distance that separates everyone involved (the exasperating, seemingly exhausted relationship between Sayo and Isao calls to mind *Jennifer Jason Leigh's* bored phone-sex operator and troubled husband *Chris Penn* in *Robert Altman's Short Cuts*). Even their hosts are divided; while Kenzo considers the kinky play a stress-relieving game (snapping pictures and shooting video all the while like a true hobbyist), his wife has shifted to a darker, more psychologically complex mindset with regard to the sessions. All are outcasts, even among one another.

Though it's hard to call the film's conclusion upbeat in any traditional sense, there is an ironic optimism to its sugges-

tion that an acceptance of one's place in the scheme of things provides a certain reassurance, even if that place isn't the rainbow's end one hopes for.

Director Konuma reminds us that even life on the outlaw fringes of conventional sexuality is still subject to the traditional frustrations of incompatibility and communication breakdown, and reminds us that simply being in touch with one's desires offers no guarantee of their fulfillment.

**BEAUTIFUL WRESTLERS:
DOWN FOR THE COUNT**
directed by Hiroyuki Nasu

A clandestine group of females meets in secret basement arenas. Their purpose: to box, to fight. Their matches are unsupervised. Fierce. Brutal. Cleansing. And occasionally topless in hot oil.

Almost all Pink Films are surprising on some level in their willingness to push the envelope, and to see *Beautiful Wrestlers* is to learn just how 'out there' pinku eiga is prepared to go in the search of high camp and wild, politically incorrect comedy. Needless to say, it's a fantastically entertaining piece of work.

Filmmaker Jonathan Demme began his career as a protege of Roger Corman, and he once recounted how scripts submitted to Corman would be

returned with comments in the margins along the lines of 'possible nude scene here?'

Corman would have no such criticisms of this camp epic from **Hiroyuki Nasu** (future director of **Be-Bop High School**), who – from the showers to the mat to the bedroom – joyfully exploits very possible opportunity to showcase the wrestling beauties in the 'altogether.'

Delivered with a poker-faced outrageousness similar to the **Sukeban Deka** or **Keko Mask** films, this chronicle of one girl's showdown with the rival wrestler who has stolen her boyfriend is light-hearted fun, and is essentially free of the perceived misogyny of most pinku eiga. It's your basic sexy-girl-wrestler-coming-of-age-film with a special emphasis on the use of tampons as a source of Popeye-like super-power in the ring, of course.

It ain't Fight Club

So what took the Pink Films so long to get here?

Check your pop culture history. Remember that **Warner Brothers** considered *Roeg* and *Carmall's Performance* unreleasable. That *A Confederacy Of Dunces* went unpublished for years. That *Klaus Kinski's* memoirs were withdrawn almost immediately upon release. That *Fellini's* last movie, *La Voce Della Luna* (*Voice Of The Moon*) has yet to be released in the United States. That *The Beach Boys' Smile* has yet to definitively surface. That it took thirty years for the international film community to 'discover' *Seijun Suzuki*.

Threats to the status quo are never welcomed with open arms, and that goes double for anything to do with sex. I can assure you, the arrival of the Pink Films is going to shake things up.

The defense rests.



*Beautiful Wrestlers:
Down For The Count*



LETTERS

WITH COMMENTARY BY EDITOR THOMAS WEISSER

Asian Cult Cinema:

#25 was cooler than usual. I really liked the "obscene" Ultraman picture. I guess by running that one, you have shut up the people who complain that you only publish pics of naked girls! And speaking of naked girls... by reading ACC, my interest in Pink Films has been peaked. I'll be checking out the ones you're releasing...

—Terry Boyle (Los Angeles, CA)

Dear Tom,

I wanted to commend you and your wife on your excellent interview with Japanese great **Yasuharu Hasebe**. I have always believed that Mr Hasebe is one of Japan's unsung heroes. Both his **Attack! Jack The Ripper** and **Rape! 13th Hour** are classics of an often disparaged genre. Thanks for bringing this talented man to the attention of readers. As a big fan myself, I found your questions sated much of my curiosity about this brilliant director. **Jack Ketchum's** overview of **Assault** was a welcome treat also. The only aspect of the film that Jack didn't highlight (and didn't have the space to, perhaps) was the superb musical score.

Hasebe's appearance in ACC was also timely for me because it loosely coincides with the US video release of my video **Masked Avenger Vs Ultra-Villain In The Lair Of The Naked Bikini (aka The Masturbating Gunman)** — I say 'timely' because directors such as Hasebe and **Yojiro Takita** greatly influenced certain aspects of the film's content, if not tone. Their influence is also present in my next film, a 35 mm theatrical feature titled **Sensitive New Age Killer**. Though there is no US distributor for **Killer** yet, the Australian theatrical bow will be in late May/early June of 2000 via a major American distributor with offices down under.

Contrary to other opinions expressed in ACC #25 (by Mr Brett Garten), I believe you and ACC have created great awareness and understanding of Asian cinema. The cheap shot at your talented wife was disrespectful.

—Mark Savage (Australia)

Thank you for the very kind words regarding the interview with Mr Hasebe. Yuko and I agree with you; we feel it was one of our best efforts. Of course, it certainly helps that Hasebe was such a personable gentleman, willing to answer even the toughest questions.

*Good luck, as well, to you. We hope your directing ventures will continue to find success. Please keep us posted on the release of **Killer**. Thank you for your continued support.*

ACC:

I have a suggestion that would make your magazine and books better and easier to digest. The problem, I think, is clear. People tend to gravitate to Hong Kong cinema because the names of performers and filmmakers are short and easy to remember (who could forget a name like John Woo or Ringo Lam or Jackie Chan?). Likewise, they tend to avoid Japanese cinema because the names are impossible to pronounce and/or remember. For example, in the recent ACC, you interviewed someone named (wait a minute, I have to get the magazine cause I don't remember his name... see what I mean?) **Yasuharu Hasebe**. How could you expect us to be interested in somebody with a name that we can't pronounce?

So... that leads me to my suggestion. Why don't you, as the editor, change the 'difficult' names of the Japanese performers to more acceptable American names. I know your first response to my idea will be

subject matter, but I'm not suggesting anything that hasn't been done – and done successfully – before. In fact, this is a time-honored tradition. For example, take a look at all the name changes in Italian cinema. Even the great **Sergio Leone** was **Bob Richardson** for a while... so, as per my suggestion, you could change **Yasuharu Hasebe** to **Jimmy Howard**. Then more people might become interested in Japanese cinema.

PS: if you're concerned about the purists complaining about the 'sanctity of the name' you could also print an 'old name/new name' glossary....

--Jeff Larkin (Detroit, MI)

While it may be true that many actors and filmmakers – of all nationalities – tend to use pseudonyms (for a variety of reasons), you are forgetting an important fact: Those people chose their new names, the decision was not made by the editor of some magazine halfway around the world.

Rather, I would suggest that you try a little harder at pronunciation and, if you can't remember the Japanese names, write them down in some kind of notebook. You have a personal problem, not an ACC problem.

Dear ACC,

Although I am not a big Hong Kong action fanatic, or Asian fetish film nut, it is always a treat to read your wonderful articles on Japanese Kijū Films. And your writers are so extremely accurate in their critiques, not just on a fan level, but as examples of detailed journalism.

Case in point: **Wyatt Doyle's** assessment of why the latest giant spinning turtle flick (*Gamera 3*) was so much more than the typical mind-numbing, heartless action fare Hollywood has been doting out for the last 10 years. Call it craftsmanship, call it creativity, call it substance over bloated budgets, *Gamera 3* has real artistic integrity. Inspired by committed filmmakers, not celebrity lawyers trying to turn a buck.

Always look forward to more coverage of Kijū. Keep up the great work!

--Brant Elliot (Santa Barbara, CA)

Tom--

Hello. I just wanted to say that I enjoy your magazine and keep up the good work! Also I want to ask if you have ever heard of an Asian actress named **Virginia Lee**. I know that she guest starred on television in an episode of *Get Smart* in 1967 and an episode of *M*A*S*H* in 1972 (an episode called "The Moose"). This may be somewhat out of your genre, but she could have starred in film also. If you have any info on Virginia, please let me know.

--Chris Saylor (via E-Mail)

Background on **Virginia Lee** is a bit sketchy. Apparently she was born in the States from mixed Chinese/American parents. She began acting in the late '40s, doing mostly TV work for **Screen Gems Studio**. She was a regular member of the 'Annie Oakley' television series from 1954-56. Virginia also starred in episodes of **Ronald Reagan's Death Valley Days**, **Wagon Train** and **Father Knows Best**. Her first official motion picture was *Parole Inc* (1949), followed by *Daughter Of Rosie O'Grady* in 1950. She also appeared in the movies *D.O.A.* (1950), *Soldier Of Fortune* (1955) and *Flower Drum Song* (1961). Perhaps there were more films, but we are unfamiliar with the titles. In the late '60s/early '70s, Virginia starred in the goofy B-Movie *Hillbillies In A Haunted House* (1967) and *Return Of Charlie Chan (aka Happiness Is A Warm Clue, 1971)*. You already know about her appearance on *M*A*S*H* in 1972. We don't know what happened to Virginia after that.

Dear Tom:

Again, congratulations on a good issue (#25). Always good to read items by **Wyatt Doyle** and **Anthony Leong**. But you are too over generous in allowing jerks like **Brett Garten** space in the letter section. His comments were really crude and uncalled for.

--T. Williams (Carbondale, IL)

Dear Mr Thomas Weisser,

I have finally gone to the point where *Asian Cult Cinema* is a "must read" zine.

I ordered your (and your wife's) **The Sex Films** guide, read it, and am devouring it. I am certifiably infatuated with all things Japanese. And it's all because of your fascinating publications.

All leaders have their detractors. Your helmship of ACC is scorned by some. However, I appreciate the direction in which you are leading us, and more importantly, I applaud your courage and beliefs.

--Steve De Rose (Chicago IL)

Dear ACC:

Greetings from Canada's oldest, not to mention smallest, Chinatown in Victoria. Don't let some of the letters (Brett Garten and McKindee2) get to you. Just because they can write, doesn't mean they can think. Keep up the good work!

--Jeffrey Taylor, Canada

Dear Mr Weiss:

I recently purchased your great book **Asian Cult Cinema Movie Guide**, and I must say that I find the work to be a treasure trove of great information on Hong Kong Cinema, which is underappreciated at best. I agree with your sentiments on **Broken Arrow** and **Rumble in The Bronx**. The former was unfulfilling and the latter lacked the punchiness of Chan's Chinese endeavors. But such is Hollywood, although I found **John Woo's Hard Target** to be a great film, even in its truncated version.

I have to disagree with you on two films, however; I thought **Last Hurrah For Chivalry** was excellent, foreshadowing the themes John Woo would later explore in other films. I thought the sleeping karate performer humorous. I found **Zu: Warriors From Magic Mountain** often overwrought and tiresome. The banter between the characters was a bit silly, although the special effects were impressive.

--Christopher Jenkins, Smithtown NY

ACC--

I look to your magazine to discover talented directors, actors, actresses and films I've never heard of or read about anywhere else. So I think to improve your

magazine you should:

1) Feature about 5 reviews an issue on GOOD films we've never seen before. It doesn't have to be evenly split between Japanese and Hong Kong films either... just whatever films are best make the issue. We wouldn't want to read about mediocre Hong Kong (or Japanese) films just because you're trying to equally represent each place!

2) Have guest reviews by Chinese/Japanese stars. It would be cool to see John Woo writing about Japanese pink films (and pretty unlikely too)

As it stands, your magazine always looks good but #24 wasted space with yet another **Star Wars** put down (I didn't know **George Lucas** was Asian), reviews of the disappointing **Men Behind The Sun** series, and an article on the laughably substandard **Pulgasser!** Why tread water when you can do so much better!

--Jim Reed

*Tread water? Do so much better? If I understand you correctly, the entire basis for these comments is you don't want us to run negative reviews! Frankly, I think you misunderstand the concept of ACC. Our goal is to inform and entertain. Towards this end, a negative review can be just as important as a positive one. For example, even though Steve Puchalski did not particularly like **Pulgasser!**, the movie, he took the opportunity - within the context of his review - to discuss the fascinating background of the film and the state of Korean cinema in general. Likewise, Graham Lewis' article on **Men Behind The Sun** was as much a dissertation in Exploitation Filmmaking as it was a review for the movie. And if Ric Meyers wants to talk about **Star Wars** in his column, then more power to him! He's got the credentials... and the ability to make it all tie together into something Asian.*

ACC encourages comments: For traditional mail, use Asian Cult Cinema, Box 16-1919, Miami FL 33116; For faster response, E-Mail the editorial office AsCuCinema@aol.com
Notice: ACC reserves the right to edit any letters submitted for publication. Further, submission of a letter does not insure publication.

Report from the 43rd Chamber

paradoxical observations on Asian Cinema by

Art Black

At the 43rd Chamber in New York, where hardcore HK aficionados hang around and debate the finer points of 30 year old movies that never even saw legitimate release in the Western Hemisphere, you can tell a newcomer's predilections by his choice of words. If he comes in looking for a movie about *Fang Shuh Yu*, he's into **Cheng Cheh's** 1970s Shaolin cycle. If he wants one with *Fong Sai Yuk*, he's a fan of the **Tsui Hark**-influenced, revisionist 1990s kung fu flicks. Same legendary Chinese folk hero; drastically different interpretations.

Names reveal much about film personnel as well. You like **Erh Tung Sheng**? You're into *Shaw Bros'* fantasy/swordplay classics from **Chu Yuan** or **Tang Chia**. Prefer **Derek Yee**? Then, post-new wave urban action and drama. **Blackie Ko** directed the action-comedy buddy flicks *Curry & Pepper* and *Chez Ni Ham* (as well as *The Days Of Being Dumb*, which lacked English credits); as **Ko Shou Liang/Or Sau Leung**, he's a gifted action coordinator and vehicular daredevil responsible for car and motorcycle stunts in a raft of modern classics, including *Aces Go Places*, *Armour of God*, *Magnificent Warriors* and *Yes, Madam*. Under all of these names and more, he's a familiar character actor known for playing heaves and comic tough guys. Whereas back in the 1980s, he brightened numerous independent fistie films under the name **Yuen Lung**. Of course, he's not to be confused with **Chu Yuen Lung**, one of **Sammo Hung's** aliases back when he was working for the likes of **King Hu** and **Huang Feng**. Or **Chen Yuen Lung**, an early pseudonym for **Jackie Chan**.

My Sui Kam Kong is your **Xu Jin Jiang** is someone else's **Elvis Tsui**. Partly, that's the result of each actor having different names in Cantonese, Mandarin and English. Partly, it's a question of who's doing the translating (and when, and where: Taiwan still uses the *Wade-Giles* method of romanization, while on the mainland it was replaced in the late 1970s by *pinyin*). And partly, it's calculated fickleness, as when clothes-shedding category III starlet **Loletta Lee** morphed into legit actress **Rachel Lee**.

Look closely at some of the popular HK film databases and you'll find film entries listing the same actor multiple times among the cast, under different names. Or better yet, films listed twice under different titles – sometimes with different credits and opposing reviews. Granted, keeping track of Hong Kong film titles is a thorny proposition. Upon initial release in the SAR, most HK films have an English title, frequently unrelated to the Chinese one. For that matter, they often have only a tenuous relation to English – witness the recent *Trape* (a conflation of *Rape Trap*), or *XIPM*, or *The Faterdngers* (actually a misspelling of *The Faterangers*, only nominally more understandable), or *Ungateful Tink* (taken from a particularly ponderous line of dialogue in the film). The refilters work their muddy magic, and a film whose Chinese name translates roughly as *Last Year There Were Especially Many Fireworks* (referring to the handover and related festivities) goes out to gwellos as the considerably less evocative *The Longest Summer*.

On the other hand, a refilter's lack of creativity can be endearing in its own right. While it makes a certain amount of sense

to "borrow" the title *Somebody Up There Likes Me* for a film about a boxer, and okay, maybe even it's *A Wonderful Life* for a life-affirming, holiday-themed comedy, you've really got to tip your derby to whoever decided *A Streetcar Named Desire* would make a perfect title for a wonky Category III lust 'n' vengeance actioner. Sure, fits right in with those other *Tennessee Williams* classics, *Witch With The Flying Head* and *Lunatic Frog Women*.

As a film visits new territories, naturally it picks up new names. *The King Boxer* in England is *La Main De Fer* in France is *Cinque Dita Di Violenza* in Italy is *Five Fingers Of Death* in the United States. Entire series like *In The Line Of Duty* (aka *Police Assassins* and *Yes, Madam*) are built-and-rebuilt-at the stroke of a retiller's pen. *God Of Gamblers* is followed by the parody *Saint Of Gamblers* (*All For The Winner* in English), then *Knight Of Gamblers* (*God Of Gamblers 2*). Things get sticky when the next sequel, *Knight Of Gamblers 2*, becomes *God Of Gamblers 3*, followed by *God Of Gamblers 2* (aka *God Of Gamblers' Return*) and *Saint Of Gamblers 2* (*Saint Of Gamblers*). Just for giggles, the last chapter to date, *God Of Gamblers 3: Young God Of Gamblers* (*God Of Gamblers: The Early Stage*) flashes us back to the very beginning of the cycle.

The reinvention of titles in the transition to home media is certainly nothing new. When *Shaolin Intruders* was shown on US television in the 1980s as part of WW Entertainment's *Black Belt Theater* package of kung fu classics, it was called *Battle For Shaolin*; *The Boxer Rebellion* became *The Bloody Avengers*, etc. At the same time, *Ocean Shores* was busily repackaging chopsockies with souped-up

new names. *Mystery Of Chess Boxing* became *Ninja Checkmate*; *Karado The Hong Kong Cat* became *Super Kung Fu Kid*. Competitors like *Beet* and *Budget* and *Embassy* and *Regal* and *Unicorn* and *World* and even major labels like *CBS Fox* and *Warner Home Video* were vying for the same market, sometimes with the same films. Soon you needed uncanny mystical abilities just to tell from the boxes that *Ninja Killer* from *Ocean Shores* was the same film as *Fearless Fighters* from *Video Treasures*, and *The Bloody Flats* from *Master Arts* was *Death Beach* from *Sony*.

The sleight-of-title practice is alive and well today, and everyone is reaping the harvest. *Dimension Home Video* has done a commendable job of spinning time backwards and making the cart precede the horse by releasing *Armour Of God* domestically as *Operation Condor 2: The Armour Of The Gods*. *SYS International*, a streetcorner hustler of a label, has replaced *The Sword Stained With Royal Blood* with the considerably cheesier title *Sword Of The Serpent*. Even the undisputed champs of domestic HK releases, *Tai Seng*, has juggled names for their dubbed, sell-through series, turning *Drug Tiger* into *Eat My Dust* and *Story Of A Gun* into *Lethal Girls 2*. Curiously, nobody I've talked to – including the staff at *Tai Seng* – has ever heard of a *Lethal Girls 1*.

Freshman indie label *Crash Cinema* is doing a terrific job of resurrecting old classics and releasing them to VHS and DVD in sharp, letterboxed prints. Unfortunately America is a Blockbuster nation, resulting in the label being forced to basically phase out their subtitled releases in favor of dubbed films. The title of *Chang Cheh's Crippled Avengers* from 1978 doesn't have the smell of mall money about it, and the same film's US release title of *Mortal Combat* has been tainted by HK expat *Robin Shou* and *Chris Lambert*. So how 'bout *Return Of The Five Deadly Venoms* instead? Has a nice ring to it, and it's even historically accurate. Renaming *Master Killer* as *Shaolin Master Killer* and *Duel Of The Iron Fist* as *Duel Of The Shaolin*

Art Black is the U.S.A. contact for Hong Kong Superstars, website: www.hkstars.co.uk. He is best known in the States for his regular column in *Psychotronic Magazine*; Mr. Black is new to the ACC family of contributors.

Fist isn't too much of a stretch, and as an added bonus the new names push the films one step further into the public domain and away from the fiercely possessive Shaw Brothers. Besides, everybody knows that the word *Shaolin* is golden in the inner city, right?

At least, that seems to be the thinking behind the marketing strategy at *Arena/Xenon*, the leading repackagers on the scene today. It's clear from names like **Wu Tang Clan** (formerly *The Heroes*), **Method Man** (aka *Avenging Boxer / Fearless Young Boxer*) and **Ol' Dirty Kung Fu** (*Mad Mad Kung Fu*) who their target audience is. Cranking out films at an astonishing clip, they've released everything from unwatchable crud to genuine masterpieces. The problem is that half the time you haven't a clue what you're getting. Plot descriptions are wrong, credits juggled, cast and director names occasionally made up from whole cloth. **Killer B's** has a picture from *Holy Weapon* on the cover, with **Maggie Cheung**, **Michelle Yeoh** and **Dodo Cheng**. None of them are in the movie, which is actually *Fatal Claws & Deadly Kicks* under a new name. Many of *Arena's* films appear to be duped straight from original *Ocean Shores* tapes. The opening titles have been replaced, and whenever the "*Ocean Shores*" logo had flashed onscreen (several times during each flick), that scene is missing. In fact, most of *Arena's* releases have been edited, sometimes drastically, none to worse effect than *Lord of The Wu Tang*, a subtitled version of *Kung Fu Cult Master* that has been shorn of a quarter hour of largely expository material, making an already hard-to-follow plot absolutely incomprehensible.

In an attempt to cash in on every major HK-related media event, the label offers **Lady Black Mask** (previously *Deadly Dream Woman*), **Jackie Chan's Second Strike** (the completely Chan-less *Final Gate*), **Hong Kong Face Off** (*Fists Of The Double K*, falsely advertised as a *John Woo* film). Then there's *Hong Kong Corruptor*, a whole new concept in deceptive marketing, touting *Chow Yun-Fat* as

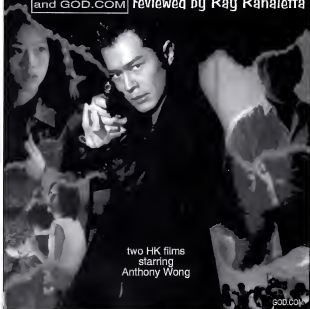
the star. In reality, it's the Chow-free *Return Engagement*, an excessive and entertaining gangster flick starring **Alan Tang**, with two brief Chow clips from *Triad Savage* (the *Ocean Shores* title for the dubbed domestic version of *Brotherhood/Code Of Honour*) edited randomly and confusingly into the story. Similarly, **Master Of Disaster** (previously the US television title of the hugely entertaining *Shaw's* film *The Treasure Hunters*) boasts of co-stars **Moon Lee** and **Jackie Chan**. Those two only worked together *The Protector*, which is not a public domain title, so what's this? Well, it's common knowledge that Jackie was dissatisfied with the *James Glickenhouse* version of *The Protector*, so he shot new material exclusively for the HK release, including some great new action scenes. *Arena* snipped out those scenes and edited them haphazardly into *New Kids In Town*, a *Moon Lee* actioner directed by and co-starring **Lau Kar Leung**. Regrettably, they removed most of Lau's scenes in their attempt to entirely eliminate continuity, but on the other hand, they left intact the bumbling grandfather segment which was excised by the censors for the UK version (released there as *New Killers In Town*). Unfortunately for the label, the cease-and-desist order came hammering down faster than a no-shadow kick, and the title has been discontinued in both DVD and VHS configurations. Similarly, their *Enter The 36th Chamber Of Shaolin* – formerly *Crazy Shaolin Disciples* – has been discontinued on DVD following a dispute over rights, although it's still being marketed on VHS.

Hardcore fans have nothing but contempt for *Arena*, but I have to confess I get a guilty kick out of their shady practices and always look forward to the game of name-this-flick. And hey, whatever their shortcomings, they're polluting the minds of new generations by filling the shelves of Tower and HMV with the films of *Moon Lee* and *Casanova Wong*, *Yuen Woo Ping* and *Lau Kar Leung*. Or should I say *Liu Chia Liang*?

Two New Hong Kong Thrillers

RAPE TRAP
and GOD.COM

reviewed by Ray Ranaletta



two HK films
starring
Anthony Wong

GOD.COM

RAPE TRAP

It's such a shame that a great exploitation title such as **Rape Trap** is wasted on this contrived, melodramatic tripe from Director **Cheng Wai Man**. **Rape Trap** features what amounts to an extended cameo by a bored and embarrassed looking **Anthony Wong** playing, surprise, a sadistic psycho who enjoys photographing women as he tortures and rapes them, then using the pictures to blackmail them into silence. Believe me, this description (bland as it is), is ten times more exciting than the film itself!

Li Shan Shan (Ada Choi) is a pretty young thing who owns and operates a furniture store. Her boyfriend, Hwa, helps out in the shop while dreaming of opening his own restaurant with a friend. Into the picture comes Ted Hwang (Wong), who persuades Hwa to convince Shan Shan to marry him. Why would Hwa agree to this? Well, Hwang needs a wife to collect an inheritance and offers Hwa \$100,000 to convince Shan Shan to go along with the scheme. Naturally, Shan Shan is none too keen on the idea, initially refusing to get involved. But then, of

course, money talks and along with the "gentle" prodding of Hwang, Shan Shan finally gives in and goes along with the plan.

So far, so good. The fake mamage is sealed and the inheritance becomes reality when Hwang receives the papers from the estate attorney, Chen Chi Pang. During this extended setup, Hwa appears to be getting a bit jealous and Hwang seems to be more than just a kind hearted businessman. I suppose Hwang dumping shit over a drunk in a restaurant bathroom is a subtle clue!

Things quickly go down the shitter (sorry) as Hwang drives Shan Shan home after the inheritance meeting. Unbeknownst to Shan Shan, Hwang had drugged her drink at the restaurant. The effects start to kick in once inside her apartment. Hwang locks the door and is obviously interested in getting rekkid with Shan Shan. Knowing she's in deep shit (cops, again), Shan Shan manages to call the Hong Kong equivalent of 911, before having the phone ripped out of her hands. The Police arrive to check things out but are convinced by Hwang that the girl is only drunk. Proof of their marriage is provided by Pang, who is tagging along with his cop father (can u say plot contrivance?). The cops leave and the fun or – shall we say – lack of fun begins. Poor Shan Shan is raped and beaten by Hwang who photographs the entire ordeal (he's obsessed with up-the-skirt shots of her crotch).

The next day arrives and Shan Shan is a bit ruffled at work. This garners the attention of Hwa. She breaks down and tells Hwa what happened to her. Hwa, who isn't exactly the picture of a loving boyfriend (sex with a chick in a bathroom stall a bit earlier) inexplicably gets pissed and, it's revenge time. Things come to a head (no pun intended) at Shan Shan's apartment when a fight breaks out between Hwa and Hwang. During the scrimmage, Hwang is stabbed by Hwa, who falls back on Shan Shan. As she gets up, Shan Shan pulls the knife out of

Hwang's torso. Can U start to smell what's cookin'?

Hwa convinces the now twice-stupid Shan Shan the only way to prove their innocence to the cops is for her to give a blood transfusion for Hwang (they both have the same, rare, blood type!). Somehow, Shan Shan manages to lose her memory (hopefully of being in this film too) and Hwa double-crosses her, telling the police she stabbed Hwang because he reneged on the money deal. Naturally, with Hwang in a coma and Shan Shan without a memory, the Police believe Hwa.

Okay... bottom line, Shan Shan gets her memory back but too late. Hwa kills Hwang and then Hwa is killed while running from the cops. Poor Shan Shan, life is the proverbial bitch for her. Although Peng becomes her attorney – cause he thinks she's too nice to have done such a bad thing (yes right!) – he cannot save her from the death penalty, despite bringing in "last minute witness" to prove Hwang was a mean ol' psychotic. So, off to death row she goes. Does Shan Shan bite it? Hell no! In pure grade Z scripting, Peng discovers she's pregnant with Hwang's baby and stops the execution just as the needle is about end Shan Shan's life. Aww, isn't that sweet?

Did I happen to mention that **Rape Trap** sucks? The plot is filled with sooo many holes and implausibilities, i.e. Peng's father just happens to be the cop on the case; Shan Shan just happens to lose her memory; Hwa just happens to get run over by a car etc... The use of flashbacks, from Shan Shan's point of view, to tell the story has the been-there, done-that feel. With a good film, this would not have been the case.

Is there anything to recommend in the film? Ummm, well its nicely lit and shot. That's about it though. Even the exploitation level barely registers due to lack of bloodshed, plus there's no nudity, not enough sleaze and actors phoning in their performances (especially Anthony Wong who is obviously just working for a

paycheck on this one). **Rape Trap** (called **Trap** in Hong Kong) is a certified DUD!

GOD.COM

God.Com, on the other hand, is the furthest thing from a dud. From the disturbing, opening, images of mass suicide paralleled alongside the graphic eviscer-



ation of a Christ statue, to the deliberately ambiguous ending which meshes fantasy and reality, **God.Com** weaves a comfortable blanket of Christian and Roman Catholic theology incorporated within the Millennial madness of the new 21st Century and the apocalyptic prophecies of the Christ's return— all inside the framework of a Hong Kong exploitation film. Surprising since, after all, the subject matter is — for all intents and purposes — not a large part of Asia's religious psyche. That said, Director Ivan Lai (*Erotic Ghost Story* and *Rikki Oh!*) has fashioned a superb religious thriller that overcomes its complex plot. While the film is admittedly a bit confusing, it deals with the subject matter in serious, straightforward tones containing strong and sometimes brutally violent imagery along with that old religious bugaboo, sex.

This time **Anthony Wong** gives a wonderful strong, low-keyed performance as Chiu, a detective who is haunted by the vicious murders of a family, slaughtered by a dangerous cult leader, Lin Yu-tin. Even though Chiu captured Yu-tin, he



regrets not having killed this "epitome of evil" and has since suffered the curse over the past 18 years. As a result of the event, Chiu helped the only remaining survivor, a young boy, and involved himself in Astrology, becoming so proficient as psychic that his talent is used as a reliable source by his own Police Department. The case and his talents will come to have a profound affect on a current cult-murder/suicide which is the major focus of the film.

The current case involves cult members who had belonged to *The Church of The True God*. The members were seemingly poisoned to death— of their own accord or otherwise. Chan is the officer in charge of the case, tough-nosed and a believer nothing-but-the-facts. His attitude will soon change as he – reluctantly at first – consults with Chiu while also being haunted by violent images of death. Chan eventually learns that he is the surviving child from Chiu's case. Plus his current case bears an eerie resemblance to what happened to his family 18 years ago. The Church of the True God is headed up by a "Christ-like" figure called "The Pope" by his devoted followers. Of course, all is not what it seems as "The Pope" uses supernatural powers along with a talent for hypnosis to dupe his lambs to their eventual slaughter. But why? He is a false prophet preaching salvation, basing his preachings on Armageddon, which – according to him – will occur on Jan. 1st, 1999, the day of Judgement. In actuality, he is seeking "personal redemption" through the fate of his followers, redemption for the wrongs heaped upon him as a child. Sounds cheesy (I know) but it plays out well. Of course, his redemption and salvation has a lot to do with "free love", so sex is also a big part of his game. That, along with charging his followers \$5,000 per month to remain a member in good standing. What if they can't come up with the dough? Why, can u say.... Prostitution!!

Meanwhile, Chiu and Chan visit Lin Yu-tin in jail. Yu-tin drops religious-fla-

vored hints about the case, along with the struggle between what is perceived to be good and evil. These cryptic words form the basis of the film's theologically flavored plotline. The Bible is capable of being used for evil purposes by those with an intellect strong enough to twist the ideals and teachings within its pages... to mislead those who are easily influenced, looking for salvation – not from within themselves but, because of their weak will – through others. Chan almost follows this route to his own destruction, courtesy of The Pope. He is saved, however, by the supernatural interference of Yu-tin.

Why would Yu-tin interfere? Isn't he just as evil as the Pope – if not moreso. Chiu thinks so. And as January 1st approaches, Chiu and Chan make their peace with each other and head off to confront their respective devils for the final time.

Suffice it to say, the confrontations are presented logically and are dramatically satisfying (within the framework of the story), relying on the unravelling human drama as opposed to an fx laden confrontation. I won't give away what happens, except to say that there is a unique link between The Pope and Yu-tin, with Yu-tin being none too happy about it. A final twist to the film blurs the logic that preceded it, but you'll have to decide if it works... or if it's a cheap, copout ending.

Either way, *God.Com* is a fond return to the days when one could be disturbed and entertained at the same time by the outrageousness inherent in Hong Kong genre product. Graphic bloodletting, sleazy seductions and imagery, combined with a disturbing tone, intriguing plotline, strong performances and assured direction make *God.Com* a WINNER! if not a bit dated after the big 2K fiasco.

Besides contributing regularly to ACC, Ray Ranaletta is a deputy sheriff with the NY Highway Patrol. He is also married with children and the biggest Kiss fan in America.

"SOMETHING HUMOROUS,
SOMETHING DARK, SOMETHING HORRIBLE.
I WANT TO CONFUSE
THE AUDIENCE!"

The Charismatic Mr Kurosawa

AN INTERVIEW WITH
KIYOSHI KUROSAWA

by Miles Wood



Kiyoshi Kurosawa's breakthrough film *Cure* (breakthrough, at least, as far as international audiences are concerned) is occasionally categorized lazily as a Japanese **SE7EN**. But it was actually penned in 1991 by the director (yet his novel based on the screenplay was completed afterwards at the behest of the film company). He manages to explain (through a combination of English and some hastily scribbled notes) that *Jonathan Demme's Silence Of The Lambs* is far more influential on his work. But he did concede that the studio was undoubtedly looking for him to repeat the commercial success of *David Fincher's* film.

Kurosawa, born in 1955 in Kobe, graduated from Rikkyo University in 1980. He started out shooting films on 8mm while at the University, and his first short, *Shigarami*, was selected for the 1981 PLA Film Festival. But he gives the impression

With ever-increasing worldwide acclaim for his 1997 serial-killer drama *Cure* [reviewed in ACC#22] and his then forthcoming *Charisma* due to premiere in the *Directors' Fortnight* at Cannes, Kiyoshi Kurosawa visited Hong Kong to attend a mini-retrospective of his his work, as part of the 1999 Hong Kong International Film Festival. It was there that Mr Kurosawa kindly lent his time for this interview.

of simply stumbling into film, rather than fulfilling a lifetime dream.

I had never even thought of being a professional director. But I had a friend, Kazuhiko Hasegawa, who is actually ten years older than me, and he asked me if I had any interest to

work for him, and so I did it as a part-time job. At that time, I just thought it was a good opportunity to see how to make a professional film. This was the first time that I acted as Assistant Director.

Kurosawa then made his first feature *Kanda River Pervert War* (Kanda-gawa Inran Senso, 1983), a pink film (sex film) produced for 3 million yen (approximately \$25,000), which was subsequently released by *Nikkatsu*.

It is tempting to view *Nikkatsu* – a once-major studio that hit hard times in the late sixties and rescued its operation by producing roman porno – as the Japanese equiva-



Kanda River Pervert War

lent of *Roger Corman's New World*, with Kurosawa the latest wunderkind to emerge from its ranks. But he tells of less happy experience with the company, specifically their shelving of his second film, *The Excitement Of The Do-Re-Mi-Fa Girls*:

I asked them why, and they said 'it's not a Nikkatsu film.' When I inquired what they thought a 'Nikkatsu film' was, they could not answer. They just knew that my film wasn't one.

In truth, it is perhaps not so surprising that Kurosawa's movie did not find favor with studio executives, undoubtedly more interested in satisfying sex-hungry customers than putting semi-experimental films in their theatres. Viewed today, the movie – a truly anarchic work recalling *Jean-Luc Godard's* less accessible films or those of *Dusan Makavejev* – plays like the kind of purposefully obscure exercise that many directors (*Brian de Palma* and *David Cronenberg* to name but two) seem to have the need to get out of their system early on in their careers.

Kanda River Pervert War, surely the strangest tribute to *Howard Hawks' Red River* one could imagine, had already made it plain that the French New Wave, (and most especially *Godard*) was Kurosawa's primary inspiration, evidenced



director Kiyoshi Kurosawa today

in the director's [ocular] treatment of the sex scenes, numerous playful references to other movies, the Gallic music score, and the spoken closing credits.

Jean-Luc Godard is the director that I like most, and when I first started making films, I wanted to imitate other directors styles. 15 years ago, I thought by following someone else's style, I could learn how to make films.

I think Godard always presented sex in a very humorous way. In my films, you can always find some humor; it is something that I want my films to have.

The film proved distinctive enough to attract attention of critics and fans (among its admirers, one Juzo Itami, who would appear in the director's next film). As a result he found himself allotted a far more generous budget, courtesy of Nikkatsu, for *The Excitement Of The Do-Re-Mi-Fa Girls*.

However, when his sophomore film –



despite embracing a familiar Nikkatsu *Roman Porno* scenario – was considered simply too leftfield for the general paying public, Kurosawa bought the film from the studio, edited out half the sex – “so those under 18 would be able to see it” – and inserted new video footage to bring it up to a releasable running time.

(After editing it) the film was only 50 minutes long. The new producer, my friend, told me that it was too short and he wanted me to make it longer, by as much as 30 minutes. But I had no money to do this, so I ended up shooting those additional scenes on video.

Kurosawa was consigned to spend the next four years acting, scripting, and apprenticing on some of Itami's own productions, but in 1989 he found himself once more at the helm, this time of a big-budget haunted house movie, *Sweet Home*. After a couple of big hits (*Tampopo* and *A Taxing Woman*) Itami had decided to produce a Hollywood-style supernatural thriller. With unlimited money at his disposal, he was even able to afford *Dick Smith* (*The Exorcist*) from America to handle the special effects. Kurosawa was assigned to direct.

Stylistically, the film differs both from

both stills from
Kanda River Pervert War
(courtesy of Nikkatsu)





some 7 years earlier), it is undoubtedly a major addition to the canon of cinematic ghost stories.

After helming one story in the omnibus film **Dangerous Tales**,



Kurosawa again found inspiration in the work of Tobe Hooper, this time for his chilling exploration of unmotivated violence – which would become a key theme in his time – **Security Guard From Hell** (1992).

I think it is a very important element for me. Normally, man has some kind of reason for the things he does. But I think sometimes man will do something without any motivation. In a story, motivation is an important factor. But in reality, no one really understands the reasons behind motivation. No one knows why they act like they do.

In conveying the sheer forcefulness and impact of the killings – without resorting to gallons of blood gushing across the screen – the director is clearly indebted to Hooper's treatment of violence in his masterpiece **The Texas Chainsaw Massacre**.

Unfortunately for Kurosawa, the company that produced the film went bankrupt immediately upon its completion, and Kurosawa frustratingly found himself confined to television work for the next four years.

He would not return to the big screen until 1996, when he directed a series of six yakuza movies for **Daiel**, **Katten Shiyagare**. Sandwiched between them is **Door 3** (1996): the title may give the impression of an insignificant sequel, but this exquisitely crafted thriller is actually a key work in his oeuvre. Bearing no relation to the previous **Door** films, the movie anticipates **Cure** in its exploration of mind control and loss of identity, feelings which Kurosawa attributes to his own state of being at the time.

It is a way to lose yourself... to forget who you are and to make yourself disap-

Kurosawa's earlier and his subsequent work; fluidly shot, tightly edited, employing close-ups and a multitude of elaborate compositions shot through all manner of foreground objects. It is an aberration which Kurosawa attributes to the interference of his producer. Their friendship was severed by their dispute over the finished film.

He cut, cut, cut... I did not want to do this or that. I did not like the style of the film. However, Mr. Itami was my friend, and because we were friends, I tried to talk to him... we argued many times. I treated it as a challenge.

Nevertheless, **Sweet Home** remains a major achievement, easily eclipsing it's American counterpart, **Poltergeist** (Kurosawa cites its director, **Tobe Hooper**, as a major influence), with characters and emotions taking precedence over the elaborate effects. Along with **Nobuhiko Ohbayashi's House** (also made for Toho,

pear. I have a query about whether we really are ourselves or not; I query about whether it is absolutely true that "I" am a real thing or not. When I am thinking all these questions, "I" disappear! This is the feeling that I hate.

While the parasite reveals the influence of David Cronenberg's *Shivers* (aka *They Came From Within*) (which Kurosawa admits to liking) this was an idea actually forced upon the narrative at the insistence of the producer.

In *Cure*, made the following year, a similar situation is given a psychological rather than a biological prognosis. The director rather amusingly attributes his interest in psychology, apparent as far back as *The Do-RE-Mi-FA Girls*, to his frightened response to *Godzilla* – the first film he ever saw – horror – at the age of ten, an experience he also cites as kindling his interest in cinema.

A powerful but at times ambiguous film, Kurosawa readily admits that the fate of one of *Cure*'s characters is unlikely to be figured out by the majority of viewers, but his willingness to leave such plot-points barely explained help his movies linger in the mind far longer than their Hollywood counterparts. And the director isn't adverse to clearing up a few of the film's nagging questions.

For instance, the doubt about whether the Detective (played by Koji Yakusho) kills his wife, and if so, is it an act of his own choosing or is he compelled to do so by Mamiya (Masato Hagiwara)?

The Detective acts on his free own will to kill his wife. At the end of Cure, the Detective is very clever and calculating, he is not crazy. He may think the best way out for his wife is to kill her, but he knows it is for his own good, as well. In society, you may think the Detective is crazy. A monster. But actually he cured his wife perfectly.

Which would seem to explain the film's title, except that the director goes on to stress: *This is not the only cure; there are many cures.*

The other great mystery of the film is the

fate of the psychologist, who it appears kills himself for no apparent reason.

When I shot the film, the Psychologist was killed by the Detective. But the audience cannot see this scene. Kurosawa attempted to explain with those words, though the language barrier (his English is only slightly better than my Japanese, and the translators grasp of either was open to debate) leaves an ambiguity to this statement, as to whether he actually shot such a scene or if this was simply how he imagined the narrative.

Interestingly, Mamiya in *Cure* also serves as a good example of the recurring use of names in Kurosawa's films, a trait he seemingly shares with Gonin director/writer Takashi Ishii.

Mamiya is a popular noble name which appears in a Japanese style film called Otsu, yet it is not a popular name in other Japanese films. In my mind, I always assign a particular name for a particular type of film. I only use one or two names for a certain type of movie. For example, if I had been making a comedy, I would have given another name to the character.

Cure was actually made in the middle of a second series of yakuza films, this time each starred the same actor Aikawa Shijow. They all dealt with the subject of revenge. Produced principally for the video market but allowed short theatrical runs, usually in arthouse venues – a now popular practice in Japan – Kurosawa clarifies that unless he is shooting expressly for television he never frames his films for the small screen, his preferred ratio of 1.85:1 is clearly exhibited in his meticulously measured compositions. Less clear though is his feeling for the genre:

I did not know whether I really liked Yakuza films or not, but I was poor at that time... I just thought I might be able to produce a film if it were a Yakuza film.

In Yakuza films, you have bad guys and good guys. You know who is the top, who is second, third and so on. The relationships in the Yakuza are all simple and clear. It's easy to distinguish

between enemies and friends. Consequently, the basic story can be very simple, but ultimately this enables you to make the characters more complicated.

The success of *Cure*, however, put Kurosawa in the enviable position of being able to move away from genre cinema with his most recent productions including *License To Live* (1997).

There are many kinds of film genres: action, horror, love story. Actually 'no genre' is one kind of genre! I want to shoot all kinds of film, not to shoot only one kind of film.

Unfortunately, the intriguing premise (a man awakens from ten years of coma) is virtually abandoned some fifteen minutes into the movie, in order for the director to explore a previously unexplored topic that interested him—the family.

The film's ending is also disappointingly—rather less enigmatic than his other films—though he clarifies his intentions by stating:

I wanted to express that even if the main character dies, his existence is still significant. There is still some proof of his existence, no matter what else may happen.

But it perhaps suggests that while Kurosawa enjoyed his newfound freedom, he is more comfortable when constrained by the dictates of genre—constraints which



Security Guard From Hell



Charisma



Cure

he can choose to twist and bend into his own particular shape. Similar to such Hollywood directors as Samuel Fuller. The mere mention of Fuller's name has Kurosawa bubbling with awe and excitement. The new film, *Charisma*, has brought Kurosawa full-circle back to that environment.

Charisma reunites Kurosawa with Koji Yakusho, here playing a detective, who leaves his job and family after poor judgement leaves both a kidnapper and hostage dead.

I shot it last February. It was created by mixing to-together two or three different genres.

Something humorous, something dark, something horrible. I want to confuse the audience!

Reassuringly, it sounds rather like Kurosawa plans to carry on his practice

of beguiling and unnerving viewers—in much the same way as he has for the past decade and half. We look forward to reporting his success in future issues of ACC.

Miles Wood is new to the ACC family, he's an international journalist who writes for many genre magazines; Miles and his wife Daisy make their home in Hong Kong



Ric & Infamous

a column by the notorious

RIC MEYERS

Project A made me do it. Of course Drunken Master convinced me that Jackie Chan was a comic book hero come-to-life, but Project A convinced me that he was some sort of action film genius. And it was my fruitless search for a letterboxed, subtitled copy of Project A that led me through my new voluminous kung-fu collection. So it was only fitting that it was the sight of a Project A DVD (digital video disc) that led me to buy a DVD player....

Now it's too late because I feel about the DVD much the way I felt when first getting a computer (an Apple II Plus way back in 1981). Then, I figured if the computer broke I could go back to the typewriter, but after a few months on the pc, going back to my Smith-Corona felt like going back to crawling after walking. So, now, actually, I feel that way about video. I no longer watch them if the same movie is on DVD.

Just as the collapse of the Japanese economy led to the collapse of international action film production, it was the lowering of DVD player prices that led to the widespread public awareness of DVD glories. Essentially even *Walt Disney Films* and *Steven Spielberg* only took the DVD seriously when a greater portion of the American public could as well, with prices dropping

from a minimum of \$300 to below \$200, and the machines becoming available everywhere from Bradlee's to CompUSA.

Now DVDs are even available for rent at many Blockbusters, at the reasonable price of \$3.99 for five days. Why five days? Well, cinemafonds such as myself need at least five days, because we'll wind up watching the movie at least three

times. And not because of the pristine digital print and room filling sound. No, it's all about the extras.

Seeing Jackie Chan in *Rush Hour* was fun. Seeing the DVD of *Rush Hour* is even more fun... with the director telling you how each scene was made as you watch it, the great composer **Lalo Schiffrin** also tells you how he wrote the music as you listen to it accompany the sequences, you get to see all the deleted scenes, watch the music video *Dru Hill* made for the film, and finally view the "Making of" featurette (and that's not counting the cast and crew biographies and filmographies, along with the directors college student film - with more commentary by the



Jackie Chan in *Gorgeous*

director himself – not to mention even more material that can only be accessed on IBM-compatible computers...

By the way, **A Piece Of The Action**, the behind-the-scenes featurette about the making of *Rush Hour* is one of the best because it is essentially the raw footage from a seemingly incomplete short, including an extended section showing how Jackie conceived a part of the fight above the restaurant. Seeing Jackie work with his stuntmen to develop raw ideas into finished bits is one of the most edifying looks into Chan's creativity ever revealed to fans.

And that's just on American DVDs. Remember, this all started for me with the **Project A** DVD. I saw it in New York's Chinatown, but didn't get it because I had no player yet. Then, when I got the player, I called the good folk at **Tai Seng** (800-888-3896), but they informed me that the **Project A** rights had been hoarded by an American studio (as had **Drunken Master 2** and **Jet Li's Fist of Legend**). I didn't let that stop me from acquiring many of Tai Seng's great DVDs, including the especially enhanced **Bride With White Hair** with audio commentary by the director, **Ronny Yu**, and the gross and engrossing **Untold Story** with extra special commentary by award-winning cult actor **Anthony Wong**.

I'll have more complete reviews of those films soon, but I still had **Project A** to track down. Finally finding it

back in Chinatown, I was disappointed it had no audio commentaries or making-of featurette, but it did have a wonderful widescreen print, loads of information about the cast and crew, its original theatrical trailer, previews of other Chan films, and a selection of languages and subtitles to choose from.

Now the question wasn't whether I would get more DVDs, it was how many, how fast, and where from? For the first time in decades I was torn between mainstream and Chinatown stores. Which should I get first? The 25th anniversary edition of **Enter the Dragon** (with both the original making-of featurette as well as a new **Bruce's Words** short, plus restored footage originally cut in 1973) or **Jackie Chan's Police Story**? The special edition of **Tomorrow Never Dies** with more extras than this column can contain or **Jet Li's Shaolin Temple** movies?

I wound up getting them all eventually, and, again, the **Jet Li** DVDs will be reviewed at a later date, because this column is all about **Dai Gow** (big brother) **Jackie Chan** the man. So anyway, despite this abundance of riches, if there was one DVD I wasn't going to get it was **Gorgeous**, Jackie's new movie, thus far unreleased in America. I had heard all I wanted to hear about that film – that it was Chan's long-hoped-for romantic comedy, that he had impregnated a female co-star, that it was the first Chan film with no action...

F.J. DeSanto, whom I met when he was the 15 year old Chan-Fan #1 (but is now both a movie exec and the co-front man for the rock group, **The Aggression**) quickly dissuaded me of my preconceptions. Try it, he said, there's more action than you might think. And indeed there was... and a good thing too. Because while **Gorgeous** is one of the most attractive, accomplished movies ever made in Hong Kong, it is something of a whimsical mess. Director **Vincent Kok** makes great use of set, costume, and makeup design as well as special effects to make dolphins and fishtank aquatics to react on cue, but the plot doesn't so much lurch as amble from one abortive – albeit time-consuming – plot semi-development to another, with nothing ever quite coming together.

Sexy soft-core HK porn star **Shu Qi** (who graduated to the mainstream with an annoying portrayal in **The Black Sheep Affair** and an effective performance in **Storm Riders**) here plays a daffy, star-eyed fishing village girl who finds a lovelorn message in a bottle (the only connection this film has with the recent, forlorn **Kevin Costner** tearjerker, which once shared much the same name), only to discover its Hong Kong author is a gay make-up man played by the great **Tony Leung** (of **Bullet in the Head** and **Hard Boiled** fame).

But when she joins him on a fashion magazine

assignment she meets recalcitrant magnate and playboy G. N. Chan, who she saves from a beating by his childish childhood friend, now business rival. This first fight on a cabin cruiser sets the tone for the action that follows. Although the sound effects are incredibly soft, making the moves harder to follow, the speed and complexity is even greater – highlighted by a wonderful bunch of moves centering around Jackie's jacket, which is pulled from him and put back on repeatedly as he stymies the comedy-relief thugs with a series of clever twists and spins.

Tired of hopping from girlfriend to girlfriend, Chan is delighted by the "zanniness" of his ripe new friend, and lets her share his fabulously wealthy – though empty – life. Apparently disturbed that just going along would end the film at the thirty minute mark, Shu decides to impersonate a Taiwanese mobster's girlfriend (whom she had been mistaken for on the plane ride to Hong Kong), so Chan will think she's more than just a simple fishing village girl, or something.

The impersonation is so painfully obvious, as is the artificiality of both Chan's business rival, his thugs, and his plan to import a master fighter who is smaller and handsomer than Jackie, that it is hard to really get involved with what is laughably presented as a story – as beautifully as it is filmed. Highlighting the contrived progression is Jackie's two

bouts with the imported fighter, interrupted by an extensive training music video.

It would probably be wise to skip the film and just jump to the action, which is glorious, despite the annoying sound effects, which are as under-done as the old-style ones were overdone. Jackie's in white, his antagonist is in black, and they go at it, just testing each other's skill sans blood, dirty tricks, and anger – Jackie resuming the lesson he learned in both *Fearless Hyena* and *Wheels on Meals*; relax, smile, have fun, and win.

Meanwhile, a fishing village boy shows up to hunt down Shu, but yada yada yada... it's all so much tiresome – apparently desperate – make-it-up-as-you-go time-filing, sparked only by a totally incongruous, but welcome cameo by comedy dailies **Stephen Chiao**, who gives the film its only true laugh as a stupendously serious patrolman teamed with a clueless, overly powerful dog (a scene that remains, apparently) only in this DVD version).

Yet still, the movie drags on to a painfully extended confrontation with Shu's father back at the fishing village, after which, at last, the various career-ing cast members pair up in transparent, facile, though often satisfying ways, sealing the movie with the message: be romantic, because, hey, you never know. The real message, however, is, thank the lords

of cinema for the DVD, because it makes even pics like *Gorgeous* into something worth savoring.

In addition to the film, this DVD boasts Stars' Files, Coming Attraction trailers, a making-of featurette, interviews with Jackie and the director, the music video in both Cantonese and Mandarin, and a press conference (the only extra not subtitled in English, sadly) where Chan and Stephen Chiao announce their agreement to make cameos in each others films (Jackie appearing in Chiao's far funnier *King of Comedy*).

I'm certainly glad Chan got this out of his system, and hopefully the lessons learned will filter into his new "Western/Eastern,"

Shanghai Noon (scheduled for this summer, despite the fact that the studio pulled the plug on the project's Calgary shoot just two days short of completing the film's final fight scene) and his just announced new international effort, tentatively titled *The Giant*, with Jackie as an injured ex-member of the Chinese national gymnastic team who learns that love and friendship is more important than money when he competes in the triathlon-like *Iron Giant Challenge* (not to be confused with the wonderful American animated *Iron Giant*).

But no matter how these efforts turn out, I know one thing for sure: I'll be watching them on DVD.

Ric Meyers is movie columnist for *Inside Kung Fu* magazine and author of many respected martial arts reference books.



In 1862, Anna Leonowens, the widow of a British officer, left her home in India to take up residence in the Kingdom of Siam (now modern-day Thailand), where she was hired by the reigning monarch, King Mongkut, to act as governess for his numerous wives and children. With her son Louis at her side, Anna drew upon her British heritage and teaching experience to bring new ideas and fresh perspectives to the King and his royal court. Her efforts have been credited to paving the



way for the numerous social reforms that were instituted by King Chulalongkorn, Mongkut's son, upon his ascension to the throne in 1873, which included the abolishment of slavery. After spending five years in Siam, Anna settled for a few years in the United States, where she turned to writing, authoring her two famous accounts of life in the Siamese court, **The English Governess at the Siamese Court** and **The Romance of the Harem**. She finally took up residence

in Canada, where among other accomplishments, she founded the *Victoria School of Art* (now known as the *Nova Scotia College of Art and Design*), before passing away in Montreal in 1915. Or so it is thought.

The story of Anna Leonowens, her relationship to King Mongkut, and her published recollections have stirred much controversy over the years. Historical scholars, having delved into the life of the famous British governess, have uncovered a glaring number of inaccuracies in her books and the statements she

made about her life. For example, though she was married to a man named Thomas Leon Owens, he was not an officer in the British Army; instead, he was a clerk who held a number of odd jobs, including that of 'hotel keeper' at the time of his death. Her position within King Mongkut's court is also in dispute, as she was hired merely as a teacher of English, instead of the more prominent position of governess. Her influence on royal affairs was also similarly exaggerated, as she

Ghew Yun-Fat
Jodie Foster



was relatively unknown among the small circle of British consular officials in Bangkok, despite her alleged position within the royal court. Her books have also been criticized for their lack of historical accuracy, as she writes of events that have been strongly disputed by cultural historians familiar with nineteenth century Siam.

For example, in *The Romance of the Harem*, Anna makes reference to underground dungeons in the royal palace where uncooperative concubines were imprisoned, and an eyewitness account of a public execution involving one of the King's concubines and her lover – both 'facts' of which have been viewed as sensationalist fiction purely aimed at increasing the sales of her books.

Despite the controversy surrounding her, the story of Anna and King Mongkut has caught the imagination of the public several times over the last five decades. Anna's books were popularized in 1944 by *Margaret Langdon's* novelization *Anna and the King of Siam*, which was promptly made into a film of the same name two years later, starring *Rex Harrison* and *Irene Dunne*. This then brought about the *Rogers and Hammerstein* Broadway musical *The King and I*, which gave *Yul Brynner* his most recognizable film role (*Magnificent Seven* notwithstanding). Earlier this year, *The King and I* was itself reworked into a tepid animated musical that suffered from horrid animation and audience indifference. Not surprisingly, throughout its various incarnations, each retelling of Anna's story has been associated with cries of protest, particularly from those of Thai ancestry, who denigrate the memoirs of Anna for their inaccurate, ethnocentric, and sometimes racist depiction of the Thai people and their social mores.

For example, since its 1956 release, *The King and I* has been banned in Thailand. Similarly, the arrival of the animated version of that film earlier this year was greeted with protests from a number of Thai interest groups, such as the boi-

terous call to boycott the film by the Thai Students Association at the University of Michigan.

And now, in year 2000, another storm of controversy is brewing with the December release of the fourth film on the topic. This time, *Anna and the King* is a live action 'epic romance based on *The diaries of Anna Leonowens*', and was embroiled in controversy even prior to production, when the Thai government refused to allow filming in their country despite three script changes.

This latest version pairs *Jodie Foster*, one of the most accomplished actresses working in Hollywood today, with *Chow Yun-Fat*, the transplanted Hong Kong actor whose stateside success has so far remained elusive. And while it is difficult to view the film as a purveyor of historical accuracy, the measured performances of its two leads make *Anna and the King* an entertaining, and sometimes even engaging, East meets West drama.

Anna and the King begins with the arrival of Anna Leonowens (Foster) and her son Louis (Tom Felton) in Siam, where she has been hired to tutor the King's eldest son (Keith Chin). However, Anna's assertive demeanor and outspokenness quickly put her at odds with the members of the royal court, who view the new arrivals as stepping beyond the bounds of acceptable behavior, both as a foreigner and as a woman. However, King Mongkut (Chow), impressed by the brashness of his son's new tutor, soon has Anna tutoring all fifty-eight of his children, as well as some of his wives.

As the bond between Anna and the King grows closer with each passing day, they each begin to reshape their perceptions about each other. Anna starts to see the King as a benevolent and compassionate leader caught between thousands of years of tradition and the inevitability of progress, while the King sees the seemingly impetuous Anna as a conduit for helping Siam and its monarchy take its place in a rapidly-changing world. Unfortunately, a number of inci-

dents threaten to derail the relationship between Anna and the King, including Anna's critical position on slavery within the Kingdom of Siam, the fate of a young woman (**Bai Ling**) torn from her true love to serve as King Mongkut's newest wife, and a xenophobic political movement within Mongkut's own government that could lead to war with neighboring Burma, a British protectorate.

This time around, the man behind the camera is **Andy Tennant**, who successfully updated the Cinderella story in 1998's **Ever After**. For the most part, Tennant recreates the grandeur of the exotic adventure yarns of Hollywood's golden age, with lavish production design and impressive cinematography, despite being saddled with a script that relies on too many shots of cute kids in an attempt to evoke audience sympathy. However, Tennant's technical and artistic prowess pales in comparison to the performances delivered by Foster and Chow, who carry the film with their uncommon chemistry.

Foster, who took home a \$15 million paycheck for her efforts, is well suited to portraying the British teacher. In addition to sporting an impeccable Victorian accent, Foster faithfully portrays Anna as an self-assured woman who finds her rigid view of the world challenged by her new experiences, yet remains steadfast to her moral convictions that transcend borders and culture. As she has done with her numerous film roles throughout the years, Foster gives her character a charismatic life of its own.

However, the film's most encouraging performance would have to go to Chow, who has finally found a role worthy of his acting talent. For his first two North American film roles (**The Replacement Killers** and **The Corruptor**), Chow was pigeonholed into the crime-drama genre that established him in the pantheon of Hong Kong action heroes. Unfortunately, both films were short on character devel-

opment and story, leaving only Chow's remarkable screen presence to carry the chore. In this latest role, Chow not only radiates charisma, but he is able to convey the stately, compassionate, and conflicting sides of King Mongkut. By far, it is in **Anna and the King** that Chow delivers his most balanced and versatile performance yet in a Western film. Perhaps now North American audiences will recognize him for the versatile actor that he truly is.

If there is anything to complain about in **Anna and the King** (other than the veracity of the source material), it would be that the screenplay by **Steve Meerson** (who also happened to have written **Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home**) is too ambitious in its scope. The film covers a lot of ground in its two-and-a-half hour running time, including political intrigue among the King's generals, and it ends up sacrificing the amount of time devoted to exploring the relationship between Anna and King Mongkut, a romance that simmers uneasily beneath the surface. Also lost in the shuffle is the positive influence that Anna has on Chulalongkorn, which needed more fleshing out, as it becomes central to the film's treatise. Had the script curtailed its excursions into adventure territory (which it overdoes in the film's climactic finale), **Anna and the King** probably would have been a much more enriching and emotionally-resonant experience.

Though **Anna and the King** should not be viewed as a product of careful historical fact-finding, it is still an impressive costume drama that concerns itself with the clash of cultures and the difficulties of balancing tradition with progress. Bolstered by two striking performances, the always reliable Jodie Foster and celebrated Hong Kong actor Chow Yun-Fat, **Anna and the King** is a fanciful and luxurious offering which brightened up the holiday movie season.

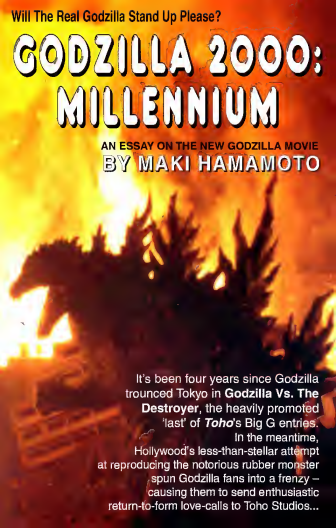
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Will The Real Godzilla Stand Up Please?

GODZILLA 2000: MILLENNIUM

AN ESSAY ON THE NEW GODZILLA MOVIE

BY MAKI HAMAMOTO



It's been four years since Godzilla trounced Tokyo in **Godzilla Vs. The Destroyer**, the heavily promoted 'last' of *Toho's* Big G entries. In the meantime, Hollywood's less-than-stellar attempt at reproducing the notorious rubber monster spun Godzilla fans into a frenzy – causing them to send enthusiastic return-to-form love-calls to Toho Studios...

Toho, claiming they had merely *leased* Godzilla to America's *Tri-Star*, decided that Japan's G-Monster could peacefully co-exist with America's Godzilla. After all, by Roland Emmerich's own admission, the Hollywood Godzilla was a mutant iguana—not a dinosaur at all! *Not really deserving of the name Godzilla.*

But once Toho made the decision to move ahead, the problems began. One can imagine the great expectancy, the great pressure, put upon director Takao Ohgawara. There were long, heated arguments before everybody decided exactly how Godzilla would look—whether to continue down the path of tradition or to design a new 'modern' Godzilla.

Was there, in fact, anything to be learned from the Hollywood Godzilla? Should Toho, for example, create a high-tempo script which relied on eye-opening computer-graphic effects?

In light of Godzilla's 'death' in 1995 and his Hollywood resurrection in '98, had the audience changed? Are the fans now expecting <demanding> more than a man-in-a-rubber-suit? Toho had to face the facts: If the American Godzilla did nothing else, it — at least temporarily —

had altered the appearance of one of the world's most recognizable characters.

"Now there are hundreds of different Godzilla images floating around in the heads of the Godzilla fans," says **Shinichi Wakasa** who was in charge of formative art and creative work for the project. (He was an intricate part of **Evil Dead Trap** as its special make-up artist.). "Godzilla is more than a monster. He is a symbol. The symbol of a genre."



the Hollywood Godzilla



Japan's Godzilla in 2000

Godzilla 2000



So what happened? What's the real deal on the new Godzilla? Did Toho, Mr. Wakasa and Mr. Ohgawara manage to combine all the different

perceptions? and, more importantly, did they successfully satisfy the fans?

And... wasn't Godzilla dead...? What did they do about that?

To justify Godzilla's comeback, Toho simply ignores the question of his death. They pretended nothing had happened four years ago, in the rubble of that Tokyo suburb, when the Destroyer rose victorious in the fateful monster death match. Rather, the new Godzilla movie is a more correctly a sequel to the very first one (*Gojira*, 1954). It's suggested that during the past 45 years, Godzilla has

'popped up' from time-to-time somewhere in Japan. <Godzilla is described as Japan's natural disaster, not unlike hurricanes, earthquakes and tornadoes.>

The prologue for *Godzilla 2000/Millennium*: it's a foggy night by the seashore of Cape Nosappu in Hokkaido (the northern-most island of Japan). An enormous creature fills the bayfront window of the lighthouse. This is not the melancholic monster bellowing from loneliness in *Ray Bradbury's* notorious short story. This is one mean MF. Yes, it's Godzilla. And he chews up scores of fishing boats while glaring at them with angry bloodshot eyes.

This time around, the main human character is a 'Godzilla-study specialist' who manages GPN (Godzilla Forecasting Network) a prediction service similar to the government weather bureau. The purpose of this organization is to mini-

mize the damage and destruction caused by Godzilla through constant detection. Forewarned is forearmed.

The GPN's work <chasing Godzilla in a 4 wheel drive> is instantly reminiscent of the action sequences in **Jan De Bont's Twister** (1996). The hyper-intense scenes are fresh and thrilling, but they don't last very long. The story soon settles into the more typical Godzilla format. No one really expected the break-neck pace to stretch throughout the movie, did they?

Allow me to digress for a moment. I'd like to share my allure for Godzilla with you. I am attracted... horrified... by the incomprehensible terror of an unidentifiable existence which may be coming towards me. I have no idea where this thing will appear, but... then, in next moment... I will see him just ahead of me. He's standing right there. Panic fills my belly. I am paralyzed.

Having said that, I appreciate director Ohgawara's decision to use lower camera angles for the movie. This filmatic option works in conjunction with Wakasa's decision to change Godzilla's physical size from 100 meters (the height of the monster since the mid-'80s) to 55 meters tall.

Now, the creature fits into the camera frame at eye level. In other words, a man

finding himself in the unfortunate position of standing directly in front of Godzilla could look up and see the monster's entire body. This new technique adds to the 'reality' of the Godzilla menace. In many of the previous films, the audience felt once-removed from the action. Much of the carnage had been photographed through the eye of the Military, shot from the wing of an airplane or helicopter high in the sky. Urgency of a Godzilla attack was diluted. With this new movie, the G threat is much more ominous, and thus, ultimately, scarier. **Godzilla 2000** respects the integrity of **Ishiro Honda's** original grim concept.

Even though I'm praising the production people for the back-to-the-basics cinematography and their thrill-show attitude, I must sadly admit the end result didn't work, at least for me. No scares. And no queasy stomach. So how come? The story doesn't coincide with my concept of Godzilla.

Godzilla shows up here and there... simply, whenever he feels like it. There's no fear. No dread. He's just a big guy with freaky face. The actual fear lies in the destruction he's capable of imposing, not in his being. So when GCI (Crisis Control Information) excitedly announces the possibility of an 'impending Godzilla arrival' <think hurricane watch here> the



Godzilla vs new foe Orga



Godzilla 2000: Millennium opened theatrically in Japan on New Year's Day; no release is currently scheduled for the U.S.

While writing for ACC, Maki Hamada is also contributor to Japan's Music Research and a member of a performing arts company in Osaka.

reaction of the people is somewhat detached – they are more serious about making plans to withstand this natural disaster. Nobody is panicked over a MONSTER in their midst.

The actor who plays CCI scientist Miyasaka is cult star **Shiro Sano**. With this film, his long time dream of playing a scientist in a Godzilla movie has finally been realized. In a recent interview, Sano admitted this dream originally drew him into the acting profession.

As a result, his performance is wildly enthusiastic, instantly reminiscent of **Takashi (Kou) Shimura** and **Akihiko Hirata** from the original *Godzilla*. Sano is quite obviously paying homage to them. Indeed, his acting is outstanding – but alas – he's alone! The rest of the stellar cast pales in comparison.

Godzilla – matching up to expectation – destroys lots of city structures and attacks a penneal power plant. The scene of G-Monster engulfed in spewing crimson flames is a great image.

As usual. This segment even takes a solemn twist. The plant is supposed to be the existing nuclear power facility at Tokai village in Japan. *Some of you may recall the infamous leaking-accident which took place there in September, last year. Am I the only one horrified by the fact that Toho had already finished*

shooting this movie a month before, in August? Was this some kind of subconscious premonition on behalf of the filmmakers...? Certainly, an eerie coincidence at the very least.

But when the movie starts philosophizing about why/how Godzilla does these dastardly things to humanity, everything becomes hopelessly pretentious. With a straight face, one of the characters explains:

"Godzilla hates the energy humans generate." Now, exactly how could anybody know such a thing? *I can't even correctly analyze why my mom acts so angry sometimes.* Another says,



Behind the scenes: *Godzilla 2000*



ORGANIZER G1

An Organizer is the molecular substance carrying DNA instructions which allow a cell to regenerate the body of a living organism. Organizer G1, is recognized as the nucleus responsible for the birth of lives – evolution of life forms – on the earth. Organizer G1 has been found in Godzilla's body cells, therein seems to be the answer to the mystery of Godzilla's extremely strong vitality



"Uncontrollable development of science created Godzilla!" (Huh?) Then there's "You can't kill Godzilla... because Godzilla is living within us!" And my favorite: "Humans' anger gave a birth to Godzilla" I see. As opposed to humans' prayer giving a birth to Gamera? I'm impressed by the turf distinction.

This sort of rhetoric goes on and on... Even to the inclusion of some activist's dramatic song-like diatribe which boldly interrupts the film's climax. Is this what Toho calls the 'good old traditional Godzilla' recipe? The screenplay caters to this type of 'drama' and many of the actors adopt a wooden stage-acting persona as they recite their lines. Perhaps, they felt the dialogue couldn't be delivered any other way.

While Godzilla is scurrying about destroying the land, a piece of meteorite – 200 meters in diameter – is discovered at the bottom of Japan Trench. The rock turns out to be a UFO which has been dormant for 80,000,000 years. Now that's a long gig. This UFO gets reactivated and fights against Godzilla. The details behind this battle will not be transcribed here, but... suffice it to say, another gigantic monster is on the horizon, namely Orga.

Orga looks a lot like Woody Harrelson – that is, until he opens his

mouth to swallow Godzilla whole. *Pretty disgusting.* The ruthless Woody – who, of course, challenges King-of-the-World Godzilla – is a transformation (amalgamation?) of the alien on the UFO, according to Toho. Nevertheless, to my eyes, the UFO itself turns into a monster as it grabs ahold of Tokyo tower. Can you guess why this happens...?

Any astute Godzilla fan should be able answer that question (since it has happened at least twice before). The whole thing has to do with a cell from Godzilla's body called Organizer G-1. *Match.*

The mystery surrounding Godzilla's vitality and his rejuvenation power has been the primary focus of many recent *Neo-Godzilla* films (e.g., *Godzilla vs Biollante*.

GIANT UFO

During a long space voyage, an accident occurred and the UFO was sunk deep in the ocean. Since the space ship was generated by light, it could not move in the dark sea, that is, until CCI scientist Miyasaka's research group found it with a searchlight.



1989, *Godzilla vs King Ghidorah*, 1991, and *Godzilla vs Space Godzilla*, 1994). This time, in *Godzilla 2000*, even more jargon is piled upon the already mysterious life-force capability of Godzilla's cell structure.

Earlier I mentioned the resemblance of the opening sequence to that of *Twister*. Perhaps, I'm nit-picking, but it seems this new *Godzilla* film has decided to rip off numerous movies <not to mention earlier installments of their own series>. For example, upon first glance, the gigantic rock at the bottom of the ocean looks like *Gamera*. When this enormous 'boulder' is activated by CCI's underwater search team, the once-dormant UFO (think the sunken alien spaceship in *James Cameron's Abyss*) transmutes into an octopus! After this mind boggling special effect, the tentacled creature transforms into a giant iguana

(an overtly obvious poke at the Hollywood Godzilla). The UFO's transmutation continues until it has become a mature monster. The end result is *H. R. Giger's* psalm-like Allen sitting on top of Gamera's shell.

What busy transformation! I accept this segment as 'playful' but it seems to be a bit dangerous as well... Like a cinematic stew with all kind of goodies thrown into the mix... but with little regard for the final product. The result – no matter how much fun to discuss – is an overload, with all the ingredients fighting each other for recognition. Now add to this heady dish some hot spices (i.e. knee-jerk environmental issues and eccentric scientific bullshit about the 'search for universal life') and you've certainly got a fun concoction. But, wow, I can't taste anymore!

On the plus side, the cinematography is among the best ever employed for a Godzilla movie – perhaps, for any giant monster movie. The scene of Godzilla on the Tokyo main street walking towards the camera with the big orange sun radiating behind him is unforgettable. I'm reminded of *Ken Takakura* in the climax of his many famous yakuza movies. Maybe I'm crazy, but I think the comparison is accurate and intentional. In those movies, Ken must fight a dual against his enemy; but he's somehow at the disadvantage. And sometimes, he does not want to fight at all. Maybe you – as Americans – haven't seen many yakuza films, but you can imagine the same scene from many of your Westerns. In the past, I have never noticed any kind of sentiment con-

nected to Godzilla's macho nihilism. This time the filmmakers got to me. Besides their use of intricate camerawork in this scene, they got me with the music. Instead of the grandiose – almost heroic – chamber music performed by a philharmonic orchestra, music director *Takayuki Hattori* uses a raw piece, similar to the sparse themes composed by *Akira Kikube* for the earlier films. This time, return-to-the-basics works for me.

45 years since his birth, Godzilla has drawn more than 90,000,000 people to the theaters, through 22 feature films (not counting Tri-Star's attempt). True, Godzilla is merely a monster. But he remains a strong icon for Kaiju eiga fans worldwide. Throughout Godzilla's

film history, this movie – reportedly – caused Toho Studios the greatest difficulties.

Tremendous efforts are in evidence by the Kaiju eiga creators. These production people also grew

up with Godzilla; they are fans of the G-Monster. In some cases they were so cognizant of international scrutiny that they relied on imitation-as-art; while other times they managed to develop new quirks in the Godzilla mythos. This crew has already begun work on the next Godzilla film. I'm looking forward to it.

GPN (GOZILLA PREDICTION NINDOUBU) YACU NEMO

A company from the private sector consisting of 500 Godzilla enthusiasts. Their job is to research Godzilla's behavior, predict his next move, and provide a 'G-forecast' to their members.



Unlike the similar governmental service GCI, they are not concerned about making mistakes because they know the nature of the study has limited accuracy. The agency is run by Shinoda (Takeshiro Murata).

GIANT ALIEN MILLENNIAN (aka ORGA)

In order to transport his essence many light years away, Millennian transforms his body into fluid quantum form. For this reason, the Earth scientists can't detect any life-form inside the UFO. Millennian uses Godzilla's Organizer G1 to reshape his body into an 'intelligent' being but the process goes awry turning him, instead, into monster Orga.



AN ARTICLE BY
MATTHEW KENNEDY

Emperor And The Assassin



13th Annual AFI International Film Festival: **ASIAN HIGHLIGHTS**

It's hard to believe that 1999 marked the 13th year of the *American Film Institute's Los Angeles Film Festival*. I have lived in Los Angeles for nine years and had never heard of the event, but this year there were at least nine World premiers and over a dozen U.S. premiers. Not just low budget garbage, but new films from Chen Kaige and Shinya Tsukamoto. Asian cinema was in heavy representation this year. Of the thirteen official selections in and out of competition, two were from Japan, one was a Chinese/Japanese co-production, one was from Korea and two were from India. That's a higher percentage of Asian films than most other festivals.

CHINA

The *Emperor and the Assassin* is a Chinese/Japanese co-production and this film is BIG. Chen Kaige's film (starring Gong Li) looks great, is amazingly well acted, and deserves to win the Oscar for best foreign film. This is epic filmmaking in the grandest sense. Battle scenes feature a literal cast of thousands. It is no longer possible to make a film equal in scope to this in America. Gone are the

days of Cecil B. DeMille and David Lean. Thank God for *Chen Kaige*.

Chen Kaige isn't merely one of the best directors in China (along with his former cinematographer Zhang Yimou), he's one of the best directors in the world. His films forever change the people who watch them. Because of this, Chinese government officials consider him to be dangerous. Of his six previous features, two (*Yellow Earth*, 1984 and *Farewell My Concubine*, 1994) were banned, then re-released, and one (*Life on a String*, 1991) was outright banned altogether. He was the first of the *Fifth Generation* directors to gain international fame, and has subsequently won dozens of awards worldwide. His father Chen Huikai was also a director of note.

The emperor in question is King Ying Zheng, a fierce dictator from the third century BC, hell-bent on unifying all of China. This is like Ghengis Khan with a millennium's head start. No meaner son-of-a-bitch could you meet. The philosophy behind the near-genocidal brutality is a thinly (if at all) veiled criticism of the Mao years in China, during which the director was forced to denounce his own father as a spy. This is the highest budgeted film in Chinese history and as epic-

in-scope as *Lawrence of Arabia*, but it is still Kaige's most personal film to date. The photography of *Zhou Fei* (*Raise the Red Lantern*) is some of the best 35mm color work ever shot. It's also some of the most brutal, featuring the mass slaughter of innocent children. This film has it all: fake assassination plots, birthright secrets, political intrigue, hectic battle scenes, concubines and all of it three hundred years before Christ. It's a Chinese *Spartacus*.

Gong Li is Zhou, Ying Zheng's concubine and childhood friend, who helps develop the scheme that will allow him to invade Yan. His ruthlessness sends her into the arms of Jing Ke, a retired badass who can put an end to all this killing if he himself gets involved. The only problem for him is his oath to never kill again. He's a Mandarin *Eastwood* for the terra cotta set. One hundred and seventy minutes never passed so quickly. I wanted to see it again immediately afterwards, but it only screened once. The movie won the festival grand prize.

KOREA

With *Birdcage Inn* (Paran Desmun) director Kim Ki-Duk has departed from his previous films (*Crocodile*, 1996, and *Wild Animals*, 1997). Here he focuses exclusively on the women in his story; not just the situations in which they find themselves. His juxtaposition of brute creation and civilization is masterful, and his symbolism unmistakable. The opening shot is a turtle scuttling in and out of traffic until a young woman rescues and releases him to water. This woman, Jin-Ah, is the protagonist, but she's also the turtle: oblivious to her need for rescue.

Jin-Ah is the new call girl at the Birdcage Inn. The only call girl. Among her few possessions is a self portrait, most likely making Jin-Ah the most talented hooker in Po-Hang.

Hye-Mi is the same age as Jin-Ah. Both are 23, but Hye-Mi is the daughter of Jin-Ah's boss and attends collage in the city. This sets an unequivocal class distinction between the two that Hye-Mi will not let Jin-Ah forget. The kinder *fille de joie* acts toward the boss's daughter, the harsher her treatment. Hye-Mi's shame of her parents occupation has led



Gong Li
*Emperor
And The
Assassin*





Birdcage Inn

to sexual frigidity, and her embarrassment shields the truth from her boyfriend, Jin-Ho. Ironically, this stern conservative listens to *Radiohead* and decorates her room with muppets.

She is slightly butch (short hair and thick features), but attractive. Jin-Ah is, however, more femininely beautiful, inspiring the passion of both Hye-Mi's father and kid brother, Hum-Woo. The former forces himself on her sexually. The latter wires her room with a microphone to listen to her coital escapades and masturbate, constantly begging her to take his virginity. He even convinces her to pose for some soft core photos which he naively sells to a disreputable magazine. Hye-Mi's mother may be the madam of the Inn, but she's not privy to the goings on. Add to this mix Jin-Ah's thug ex-friend who takes her money and smacks her around. This sounds a lot sleazier than it actually is, and in lesser hands would be mere exploitation. Credit the director for keep-

ing his head above the cess pool.

Several scenes deal with Jin-Ah and the various Johns that pay for her services. One customer refuses a condom, passing the clap onto her, which she in turn passes on to the men of Hye-Mi's family. A comical tableau has father and son inadvertently bumping into each other at the V.D. clinic. Another client

is a business man who dresses her like a school girl and beats her when she won't comply with his demands for anal sex. Hye -Mi's father, a former boxer, hears

Vanaprastham:
The Last Dance

the commotion and beats the man within an inch of his life, tossing him to the street. Later the man returns with the police. Upon seeing the location of the skirmish, the officer further beats the complaining solicitor knowing the good reputation of the Birdcage Inn.

An awkward yet touching moment involves Hye-Mi's suror, Jin-Ho, requesting Jin-Ah's services, unaware of the

identity of the owners or their daughter. Ultimately overcome by guilt, he's unable to consummate his infidelity. When Hye-Mi discovers this, Jin-Ah refuses to corroborate Jin-Ho's story. This is a means of punishing Hye-Mi for her petty cruelties and superior ways. Hye-Mi, embarrassed and frustrated, anonymously tips the authorities, who temporarily close her family's business.

It isn't until Hye-Mi secretly follows Jin-Ah on her off day that her attitude toward her changes. Furthermore she discovers her brothers wire tap and begins eavesdropping. Soon her actions begin to mirror Jin-Ah's, adopting not only her attitude but her mannerisms. She forgives her boyfriend for his prior misconduct, apologizes for her prudish views of sex and gives him the boot-knocking he's been wanting. But then Jin-Ah's photos surface and her ex-boyfriend returns, demanding the money he assumes she was paid for posing. Not having it, she is beaten. When Hye-Mi's father interjects, the ruffian beats him too. The disgrace leads Jin-Ah to a suicide attempt that is preempted by Hye-Mi. A bond has formed between them. This is never more evident than when she takes Jin-Ah's place in a client's room so that her friend may rest. It is also Hye-Mi who eventually devises the plan that gets rid of Jin-Ah's ex and unites her with a decent boatman. In the end, the gap between the two young women is bridged, and the Birdcage Inn is one happy family.

INDIA

Shaji Karun is one of the best cinematographers in Indian film, but *Vanaprastham*, *The Last Dance* is only his third film in the director's chair, following *Piravi* (1988), and *Swaham* (1994). This picture takes place over various points in time between the mid 1930's and 1960's in the life of Kunhikuttan, a Kathakali dancer. The art of Kathakali is a venerated blend of opera, dance, mime, and sign language. Think of it as

an Indian form of kabuki. "A musical instrument comes alive only when played."

Kunhikuttan was born the bastard son of a servant girl at the Kathakali school. Most of his career has been spent playing female roles, but his performance of Arjuna, the son of Krishna, attracts the acclaim of the Maharaja and the Dewan's daughter. She has become obsessed with the play, *The Kidnaping of Subhadra*, and specifically with Kunhikuttan's portrayal of the demigod Arjuna. She, herself, is named for the princess in the play and attends all of his performances. She can not differentiate between the actor and the character he plays. She sees him only when he's in costume, and lures him to adultery. Months later he is overjoyed to hear of her pregnancy but when he visits her without wardrobe she refuses to see him. Years are spent sending letters to which she does not respond. The man who spent his childhood not knowing his father will spend his life not knowing his son.

Embittered with this fate, Kunhikuttan devises a revenge plot. He will perform one last performance as Arajna. The role of Subhadra will be played by his now mature daughter. If the princess sees the fatherly love Kunhikuttan has for his daughter in the role of Arajna's great love, her heart will break and she will allow him to see his son. The real Subhadra attends the performance and is overcome by the opera, leaving early. The next day when she receives a visitor, she joyfully readies herself to be reunited with Arajna/Kunhikuttan. Instead she receives word that his heart stopped on stage the night before upon seeing her leave. Intense performances by *Mohanlal* as Kunhikuttan, and *Sahasini* as Subhadra recall the dramas of

Matthew Kennedy is a commercial actor in Hollywood; he was also the film critic for the Alh Rechtsman Radio Show on KLSX in Los Angeles; this is his first article for ACC

Shakespeare. The lavish photography, costumes and stages especially bring to mind *Oliver's* Henry V. The soundtrack is traditional Hindi Raga, surprisingly sweet to the ear. The two hour running time is well suited to the means by which the pieces fall into place: slow, but not ponderous.

Kumar Talkies screened as part of the documentary series and Murali Nair's *Throne of Death* screened out of competition. A dry, black comedy about capital punishment, it won the Camera D'Or at Cannes last year. It's a very political anti-communism piece from one of India's most controversial neo-realists.

JAPAN

After the Rain (Ame Aguru) was anxiously awaited. This was the final screenplay written by Akira Kurasawa, it also happens to be the debut film of Kurasawa's longtime assistant director, Takashi Koizumi, who employed the same crew his mentor had used. Additionally the film features performances by Tatsuya Nakadai and Shiro Mifune, son of Toshiro. This film has not yet played in Japan, and has only shown

in one other festival (Berlin) as of this writing. Kurasawa wrote in his notes with the screenplay, "It should be a story that after watching, it leaves you feeling cheered."

Torrential rains and flooding leave a group of travelers stranded at a riverside inn. Among them is aging ronin, Ihei and his wife. Ihei isn't like most samurai. He's not a brooding, menacing warrior, but instead a pleasant, smiling man. The musicians and artisans staying at the inn

series of pictures from *After The Rain*



are pleased by his good nature and lack of snobbery. At the height of the downpour, discontentment mounts at the inn and Ihei takes leave for several hours. When he returns with a feast for the guests, he explains to his wife that he had planned to sell his sword but admits to prize fighting for the money. Dueling is far beneath the honor of a samurai but his deed has brought such happiness to the unfortunates who guest at the inn. A magnificent celebration of song, dance and cuisine lifts everyone's spirits. This pleases his wife despite the manner in which the money was obtained.



When the rain breaks, Ihei enters the woods to practice his form, but stumbles upon some arguing soldiers. He steps between the duelist to prevent them from fighting, and with little effort disarms them. Lord Shigeaki bears witness to this feat. Impressed and grateful he invites Ihei to the palace and sends gifts to Ihei's wife. When asked of his skill, Ihei tells his story. He did not start life as a warrior, but instead as a bookkeeper for a small fiefdom in the south. This work bored him so he made his way to Edo. Along the way were many fencing dojos. He devised a scheme where he would enter the dojo and immediately challenge the master, not a disciple, to teach him something. Right before the master

made his move, Ihei would throw down his sword, yield and apologize. This would please the master who would in turn invite Ihei to stay and offer him food, drink and travel money. This worked all the way to Edo where eventually he became the disciple of legendary fencing master Tsuji Gettan (the means of which is greatly amusing). Ihei found work in several fiefdoms, but being Tsuji-sensei's disciple was often challenged to duels. Since prizefighting was dishonorable, he developed a bad reputation and so he was now a *ronin*.

Lord Shigeaki is a different sort of lord. He's a cantankerous old curmudgeon who lets sarcasm roll off his tongue like poetry. But he's innately like-

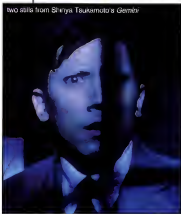
able. He enjoys Ihei's story and offers him the recently available title of sword master of the fiefdom. When Ihei faces Shigeaki in a contest he embarrassingly defeats the lord. To make matters worse, evidence of his prizefighting surfaces as well, but Shigeaki is a noble lord the likes of which Ihei has never seen.

After the Rain is reminiscent of the Kurasawa films of the 1950's. It has a timelessness that few films of recent years tend to have. It resounds with

uplifting humor and genuinely likeable characters. It's as heartwarming as *Ikiru*, and as funny and entertaining as *Hidden Fortress*, with at least one scene of arterial geyser spray a/k/a *Sword of Doom*. 1999 saw the passing of one of the world's greatest filmmakers and his leading man, but this



two stiffs from Shinya Tsukamoto's *Gemini*



film (with a dedication to Kurasawa at the beginning) brings my time of mourning to an end. The king is dead, and long live the prince. I hope that Takashi Koizumi is with us for a long, long time.

Gemini is the latest film from cult director **Shinya Tsukamoto**, the man responsible for **Tetsuo**, **Body Hammer**, **Tokyo Fist**, **Hiruko**, and **Bullet Ballet**. This time, he shrewdly changed his formula, departing from the quick cut, over-the-top fodder that made him famous. This isn't a bad thing. He's approached more mature subject matter and lost none of his magic in the process. **Gemini** may feature less gore than **Tetsuo**, but it's just as strange. Both films are equally disturbing, but in different context. This time his restraint makes the film scarier. One stylistic nuance was his decision to shave off everybody's eyebrows, which adds to the general creepiness of the piece.

And the intense performances don't hurt. **Masahiro Motoki** plays Dr. Yukio Daitokuji, a wealthy, renowned surgeon in 1910 Tokyo. Super model **Ryo** plays his beautiful, but amnesiac wife, Rin. They live in opulence in a remote suburb with his parents and run a medical clinic out of the house. One stormy eve the doctor must choose between saving a squalid plague victim (with child) or an

important politician: the poor woman and her baby die. After this his elitist class bigotry comes to the surface. He detests the poverty-stricken more than the plague itself. He starts hallucinating, or are they memories suppressed from infancy? His parents each meet gruesome deaths, one after the other, and his wife is assaulted. Her attacker turns his fury on Yukio, throwing him down a well in an isolated section of the property, feeding him just enough to keep him alive and tormenting him with stories of his life as Yukio. You see, this man is Yukio's doppelganger.

Strange sexual trysts, and role reversals elevate the nightmare-ish camera work with long pans over tattooed flesh, and plague-infested ghettos. The true nature of Yukio's relationship with his twin, his wife and his parents teach him how little he knows about himself as well as the roots to his own prejudices and hatred. The longer he is forced to exist down the well, the more like his attacker he becomes. Likewise, the more time his twin spends living his life, the more he embraces it. Rin's amnesia holds the secret to the whole puzzle. Revenge becomes the driving force in the existence of a man whose job is normally saving lives.

Gemini is a pleasantly nerve-wracking experience, and fast paced with its 84 minute running time. You can tell from the first frame (a pile of writhing insects) that you're in for a most unsettling viewing experience. It doesn't disappoint.

The festival also featured the US premier of the English dubbed **Princess Mononoke**, and a gorgeous new print of Nagisa Oshima's 1960 technicolor wonder **Cruel Story of Youth**, as part of the classic film series.

Gemini





DANNY LEE

Hong Kong's Real Supercop

A TRIBUTE BY
TONY WILLIAMS

Despite Jackie Chan laying claim to the title "Supercop" in the American theatrical release of *Police Story 3*, another Hong Kong actor has a greater claim to this distinction - **Danny Lee Sau-yin**. Best known to Western audiences for his co-starring role in John Woo's *The Killer*, Ken Hall notes that "Lee has the distinction of having played more variations on the cop roles than just about any other Asian or Western actor, and he has done so with intelligence, conviction, and a special magnetism" in his *Encyclopedia of Chinese Film* (1998) entry. Hall also notes that Lee "has been able to lend an unexpected individual dimension to the normally stereotypical roles of policeman and gangster..." Lee's abilities are also acclaimed by the Hong Kong film community. **Anthony Wong's** underrated gem *Cop Image* (1994) closes with dedicating the film to the godfather of cops himself.

Unlike **Phillip Chan** who turned to acting due to boredom with police work and ironically found himself usually cast as cops as in *Hard Boiled* (1992), **Danny Lee** always wanted to be a policeman. Finding this impossible, he sublimated his lost ambition by usually playing police roles in Hong Kong cinema. **Woo** and **Terence Chang** have often expressed their debt to him since Lee's screen reputation and police contacts often make

location work much more easier. However, **Danny Lee** is no one-dimensional actor. He is a very versatile performer as well as having experience in the fields of directing, producing, and scriptwriting.

He began his career with **Shaw Brothers**. After appearing in *The Great Cheat*, *Heroic Cops*, and *Stunning Gambling*, Lee appeared with Shaw stars **Ti Lung**, **David Chiang**, and **Chen Kwan-tai** in **Chang Che's The Savage Five** (1974), little knowing that he would be reunited with them later in **John Woo's** retirement present to **Che**, *Just Heroes* (1989). In 1975, he appeared in the most bizarre film of his career playing the title role in the **Shaw Brothers Bruce Lee: His Last Days, His Last Nights** co-scripted by and starring **Bruce Lee's** actual mistress **Betty Ting-pai**. During the next five years, he appeared in a diverse number of films such as a **Shaw Brothers's** remake of the 1976 version of *King Kong*, *Mighty Peking Man* (1977), the historical swordplay film *Assassins* (1978) with **David Chiang** and **Ti Lung**, and two films with **Chow Yun-fat** playing a vicious killer, *Heroic Cops* and *The Executioner* (unless these are the same film now re-released as *Killers Two*). Although anticipating their teaming in *The Killer*, the films (?) are little better than crude versions of a formula **Woo**



would direct more creatively. In *Killers Two*, Chow not only cripples Lee but pisses on him as well, an grotesque "heavy" action he would never perform after his leading role in Ann Hui's *The Story of Woo Viet* (1981).

After co-starring with Kent Cheng Juk-si and directing his first film *Oh! My Cops* (1983), Lee won several awards and shot to stardom with his role as a cop who suffers trauma after accidentally shooting a 6 year-old. It also anticipated Chow Yun-fat's moralistic performance in *The Killer*. Lee then co-starred with Yu Rong-guang in *Mirage* (1987), an action film dealing with Russian robbers infiltrating China after the Bolshevik Revolution, and re-teamed with Chow in *Rich and Famous* and *Tragic Hero* (both 1987). That same year, he both directed and starred in *Road Warriors* dealing with the trials and tribulations of Hong Kong traffic police. During the next two years, he co-starred with a pre-comedy Stephen Chow Sing-Chi. In *Final*

Justice (1988), Inspector Lee sets Chow's car-stealing punk on the straight and narrow. Lee then produced and played a supporting role in Parkman Wong's *The Unmatchable Match* (1989) in which Stephen Chow played a burnt-out undercover cop. Chow would also appear with Lee in *Just Heroes* in one of his last early serious roles. However, Lee later directed him in one of his funniest comedies, *Legend of the Dragon* (1990), a parody and homage to Bruce Lee. Chow played a pool playing peasant who has to defeat a professional pool player to save his fami-



ly's land. Since this was among the first of a series of successful comedy films which launched **Stephen Chow** in a new direction, perhaps **Danny Lee** may be credited for suggesting that the young actor move away from serious roles into the genre which really made him popular?

Danny Lee's performances in **Ringo Lam's** *City on Fire* (1987) and **John Woo's** *The Killer* deserve consideration together since they represent two of his most accomplished and complementary roles. In Lam's nihilistic neo-noir, **Lee** plays **Fu**, a criminal who offers undercover agent **Ko Chow** (Chow Yun-fat) the only real genuine friendship he has ever had in his life. **Fu's** genuine feelings for **Ko** ironically counterpart the personal betrayals he experiences with his police community and girlfriend. Co-produced by **Danny Lee's** own company **Magnum**, *The Killer* re-teamed **Chow** and **Danny** this time playing opposite roles on different sides of the law. **John Woo** elicited from his actors the best performances of their careers by making the characters of **Inspector Li** and assassin **John** symbiotic "blood brothers" cast very much in the vein of those cop and criminal characters within **Jean-Pierre Melville** films such as *Le Samourai* (1966) and *Le Cercle Rouge* (1972). The original Chinese title, "A Pair of Blood Spattering Heroes" also suggests **Li** and **Jeff** as modern versions of **Chang Che's** knightly heroes now inhabiting an alienating moral world. As in *City on Fire*, the two men from opposite tracks come to respect each other. But, **Woo** also presents **Li** experiencing a symbiotic bond with his quarry long before he finally meets him in very much



the same manner as the **Graham/Dollarhyde** relationship in **Michael Mann's** *Manhunter* (1986), a film which also formed one of the sources for *The Killer* as **Woo** has acknowledged.

Inspector Li's nonchalant attitude to official procedures also characterizes **Danny Lee's** other police roles as well as the actor's real life persona. In **Kirk Wong's** *Love to Kill* (1993), **Lee** offers refuge to battered wife **Elizabeth Lee** fleeing from abusive husband **Anthony Wong**. As a playboy detective walking into police headquarters with different hookers, **Lee's** performance supplies one of the rare moments of real humor in *The Untold Story* (1992), a film co-directed with **Herman Yau**. **Kirk Wong's** *Organized Crime and Triad Bureau* (1993) again depicts **Lee** as a maverick cop having more in common with his quarry (**Anthony Wong**) than his police associates while *Asian Connection* (1995) sees the **Lee** character sent to Taiwan in disgrace after bungling a drug heist. His "Yes Sir" remark to his superior represents a vocalized gem of masterful dumb insolence. Although his police role is more serious in the **Category 3** *Run and Kill* (1993), *Doctor Lamb's* (1992) con-

cluding scene reveals Lee's character recognizing a disturbing awareness of the dark kinship he shares with his antagonist (Simon Yam) in very much the *Manhunter* vein. Lee also revealed his fluency in English playing a cop in Ringo Lam's international co-production *Undeclared War* (1990), portrayed a retired cop investigating his wife's murder in *Blue Lightning* (1991), a SDU Unit cop chasing arms smugglers across the Chinese border in *Red Shield*, and a burned-out detective chasing illegal road racer Simon Yam in *The Night Rider* (both 1992). As well as producing *The Night Rider*, Lee appeared in a cameo role in his Magnum comedy *The Case of the Cold Fish* (1995), and played a Mainland detective attempting to reform yuppie Triads in *Young and Dangerous V* (1998). Lee also appeared in different films such as the Ming Dynasty drama *Sword Stained with Royal Blood* (1993) as well as playing a greedy and cowardly criminal whose body is taken over by a paralyzed cop he injured in a cross-fire.

Danny Lee has also both acted and

directed in several films. His Magnum production *Twist* (1995) embodies a good example of his talents in both these areas. It is a highly accomplished and methodical police procedure film dealing with Lee's character of Captain Lee Tit Kin investigating a million dollar bank robbery. After showing the carefully executed heist

masterminded by Yam Ka Wah (Simon Yam) with the aid of Ko Chow (Shing Fui-on) during the opening ten minutes, the authorities send into action a crack team from the Organized Crime and Triad Bureau headed by Lee himself. *Twist* reveals Lee playing less of the rebellious cop seen in films such as *The Killer* and *Asian Connection* and more of a calm, methodical, strategist out to indict an equally talented opponent. Featuring friend and fellow actor Shing Fui-on (who has often appeared in Lee's Magnum films), *Twist* is an excellent example of a genre now virtually abandoned by Hollywood.

Danny Lee's roles as actor, director,



Danny Lee
in *The Killer*



Red Shield

producer, and screenwriter all need better recognition. Although known in the West primarily for *The Killer*, his talents extend in several directions. But



Dr. Lamb

he is also the actor who personifies Hong Kong's Cinema's Ideal "Super-cop" image.

When Words Are All You Have:

RECENT BOOKS ON ASIAN CINEMA

a collection of reviews by Jerry White
with an addendum by Tony Williams

I have an expensive hobby: watching Asian movies.

It doesn't sound expensive, does it? And if I limited myself to the foreign film section at *West Coast Video* it wouldn't be. But I'm not satisfied with just Jackie Chan's *Rush Hour* movie and *Sonatine*. I love those films, but there's something about the flashiness of blurb-ridden plastic cases that really turns me off.

I seek obscurity.

I need to know: Is *Yang Chuan's* *Seeding Of A Ghost* really as disgusting as it's reputed to be? Could the decidedly un-Disneyesque *Pinochio* 964 be even stranger than its cyber-trip of a precursor, *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*?

These are significant questions (at least to me), but I live far from any Japanese or Chinese video store, and buying such films through mail order — if they can be obtained at all — costs a good \$20-\$30. For this reason drooling over the more exotic entries in the *Weissers'* indispensable film guides is both an unparalleled pleasure and giant tease. In a state of frenetic anticipation I find myself scribbling down long lists of movies I want to see, only to tuck them sadly into the folds of my book. I sigh. Someday...

But there is good news! Due to the growing popularity of Asian cinema in America, more films are being released through mainstream venues, and in the last few years there have been a number of excellent books written about Asian cult cinema. Replacing outdated texts by old school critics such as Donald Richie, books like (forementioned) *Weisser's* *Japanese Cinema Encyclopedia* series, *Sex And Zen And A Bullet In The Head*

(*Stefan Hammond and Mike Wilkins*) and *Mondo Macabro* (*Pete Tombs*) are more than just critical work — they are an introduction to the cinema itself. There's great joy to be found in reading about these original, unorthodox films... especially if it's as close as you're ever going to get. Now, today, I have the pleasant opportunity of introducing you to a collection of new books which deserve your attention.

Lee Server's *Asian Pop Cinema: Bombay To Tokyo* (Chronicle Books) is the best, most reader-friendly introduction to the vast world of Asian cinema. The book is divided into short sections on each country, and in a scant 132 pages Server manages to cover Hong Kong, Japan, China, Taiwan, Korea, Southeast Asia, India, and the Philippines. It's a tall order, and there isn't a lot of room for detail. In each section Sever introduces us to the characteristics — and some characteristic examples of — a country's cinema, then quickly moves on. In the hands of a lesser writer such an ambitious project could have collapsed under its own weight, but Server's graceful, bemused style gives the book the fast pace of a novel. I finished it in one sitting.

Though his sections on Japan, Hong Kong, and China are comprised of familiar information, the other chapters are very informative. Before reading Server's book I knew nearly nothing about the Filipino film industry, but here a quick overview is given, discussing the effect of the Marcos regime and the resurgence of Filipino film as a popularized, yet politically active, art form. His overview of Korean film is equally fascinating; in a

brief four pages Server makes it clear that Korean film is a lot more than just the award winning **301/302** (summarized here as "the *Odd Couple* plus cannibalism"). After reading **Asian Pop Cinema**, I now have a newfound interest in catching up on my Korean cinema. **The Day The Pig Fell Into The Well** and **Timeless Bottomless Movie** are at the top of my crumbled wish list.

The quality of the book is magnificent. Beautifully designed, glossy pages jam-packed with inventively arranged photographs, **Asian Pop Cinema** is just as much a work of art as the films it discusses. It's a mini coffee table book, the perfect gift for fans just beginning to explore the world of Asian film, or those who would like to learn more about its lesser known genres.

In the past, Hong Kong cinema has been ignored as an area of study in deference to what critics felt was the sexier

(both intellectually and literally) Japanese cinema. **Stephen Teo's Hong Kong: The Extra Dimensions** (BFI: British Film Institute) helps to fill that gap. An extremely serious study, Teo's book reads more like a textbook than any of its companion film guides. The first third is spent on the early years of Hong Kong cinema, tracking its development from a mere offshoot of mainland, Mandarin speaking films to a fully realized Cantonese cinema with its own identity and nationalistic agenda. Teo's painstaking research into this period of film sheds a new light on the industry's development (for instance, the first Cantonese dialect film, **White Gold Dragon**, wasn't until 1933).

Unfortunately, historical significance can only go so far. I like to read about movies I want to see, but the history of the Mandarin musical – however crucial in the merging of Mandarin and



Cantonese cinemas – is just not that compelling. On the other hand, the rest of the book is far more interesting. In his excellent analysis of **King Hu's** pivotal *wuxia pian* (swordfighting) films, Teo takes a breather from all his heavy-duty political analysis to look at how Hu uses his camera. Also good are Teo's insights into **Woo's** moral universe of *yi* (system of brotherhood) and *yiqi* (personal loyalty). His observations are sharp and well-expressed; he sees the transformation of the standard male protagonist of Hong Kong Cinema from effete romantic hero to action hero as symbolic of the change from the "subordinate status of a colonized and dominated culture... [to a] cultural registration of an increasing sense of self-confidence."

Teo is an astute critic (though his description of the vastly overrated **Tsui Hark** as "*Hong Kong cinema's one genuine prodigy*" made me groan), but **Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions** is for serious students of Hong Kong film only. Perhaps, it would have fared better with production stills – the book has none, making it look as barren as an Amish video store, and some touches of humor.

City On Fire (Verso Press) by **Michael Hoover** and **Lisa Stokes** reads like a sequel to Teo's book, but dropping the pedantic tone in favor of one that is lighter and even more illuminating. The films discussed are more contemporary and each genre – from action to horror to comedy – is given ample consideration. The authors distinguish their book from others by offering quality not quantity; the reader is not bombarded with hundreds of gratuitous plot descriptions or throw-away title lists. Each film the authors choose is considered carefully, and dissected with both style and flashes of critical brilliance.

The **City On Fire** of the title is both a reference to the **Ringo Lam** film and a symbol for Hong Kong itself, a postmodern world in constant flux due to an

accelerated rate of economic growth and political change. If Teo's critical filter is political, Hoover/Stokes's is economic; the book is peppered with quotes from Marx and Engels, and constant parallels are drawn between the films and capitalism. This view is put prominently on display in the chapter on **John Woo**, whose humanistic idealism, according to the authors, provides "an alternative to a world corrupted by capitalism." Reading this made me reconsider the Woo canon in a different light, especially **A Better Tomorrow**, which gets the best analysis in the book. It's all about the symbolic importance of food.

The Woo chapter alone is worth the price, but the rest of the book is equally engaging, illuminating films that I had already seen, or, in the case of **Comrades: A Love Story** and **Legend Of The Wolf**, adding to my must see list. After reading their analysis of **Chungking Express** in which "commodified objects contribute to a condition in which alienation has become 'social practice,'" I re-watched the movie with a keener appreciation. Reading **City On Fire** will make watching Hong Kong movies a more pleasurable experience for everyone. Buy it.

Skipping over to Japan, there's **Nayao Miyazaki: Master Of Japanese Animation** (Stone Bridge Press) by prolific anime expert **Helen McCarthy**. Miyazaki, director of such films as **My Neighbor Totoro** and the phenomenal **Princess Mononoke** is sometimes labeled the "Disney of Japan," though McCarthy argues, quite persuasively, that he should be called "the Kurosawa of animation" for his epic stories and humanistic themes.

I am not particularly an anime fan, but I do enjoy this master's films, especially **Nausicaa Of The Valley Of Winds**. In America anime is more famous for exploding bodies and exploring tentacles (which is more of a testament to our preferences than to any strange Japanese

fetishes), but Miyazaki's films are quiet masterpieces with well-drawn characters and highly complex stories. McCarthy's book discusses them all in chronological order, giving the origins of the film, a bit on the art and technique, extensive plot and character summaries, and a brief commentary.

The book would have been stronger if the plot summaries had been shorter and the commentaries longer – after all, if the reader wanted to know the plot it would be better to simply watch the film. Also, according to McCarthy there doesn't seem to be anything that Miyazaki can't do, not only does this constant praise become tedious, but one wonders if her idolization possibly clouds her judgement as a critic. For example, McCarthy argues against the criticism that Miyazaki's films can be long-winded and complex: *"It may be that to anyone without a grounding in classic literature, any plot that takes over two hours to unfold seems cumbersome."* Not only does her comment border on indecipherable, but it's ridiculously pretentious.

Nayao Miyazaki: Master Of Japanese Animation is a decent guide, with some beautiful stills and a lot of interesting background on *Studio Ghibli*, but it offers little of value in critical interpretation. Maybe this is because Miyazaki's films are meant to be experienced; their dreamlike quality somewhat eludes any attempt to categorize them into critical catchphrases.

It seems fitting to end with **Jack Hunter's Eros In Hell: Sex, Blood and Madness in Japanese Cinema** (Creation Books) which is just about as interesting as a book can get. This has a little to do with the author and a lot to do with the subject matter: which includes chapters with such intriguing titles as *Pop Avant-Garde Violence*, *Sadomania*, and *Abnormal Ward*. This is the dark and seamy side of Japanese cinema, with strange, graphically explicit photos on almost every page – necessary for a

book like this, which deals with the visual and visceral. Still, it's not a book you want out when your grandmother comes to visit.

Hunter treats his topic with an unpretentious respect, which is exactly the right tone to take with this subject matter; **Violated Angels** will never be *Ugetsu* no matter how aesthetically pleasing the nurses' bodies are arranged. While **City On Fire** offered keen analysis of a select group of movies, **Eros In Hell** offers little analysis but brief descriptions of hundreds of movies. Hunter's book would have been even more interesting had he given other films the attention he gives **Moju** (Blind Beast) and **AI No Koriida**; on the other hand, I enjoyed being exposed to such a vast array of films. And really, how much is there to say about the gleefully self-explanatory **Maniac Rapist With Handcuffs**?

I wrote earlier that these books offer readers an opportunity to explore the world of Asian cinema even if they can't get the movies. With the majority of **Eros In Hell**, the descriptions are enough for me. I couldn't put the book down, wondering how far the next film would go. Judging from Hunter's description, **Hisayasu Sato's Woman Abuse: Naked Blood** (aka **Splatter: Naked Blood**) could quite possibly be the most disturbing film ever made. The fact that there are people who view the following scene as an enjoyable experience fascinates me: *"Starting with the erogenous zones, she cuts off her own vaginal lips and devours them, raw and bloody; next comes her nipple, sliced clean off, and then she plunges the fork into her own eyeball..."*

Fascinating, yes—but there are some things I don't need to see. In this case, the book is enough.

Jerry White, a regular contributor to ACG, is a recent graduate from Emerson College with a Masters Degree in Creative Writing. He is instructor for the class Blood and Gender Through the Lens of Asian Cinema

Addendum

by Tony Williams

John Woo: The Films. By Kenneth E. Hall. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co. 1999. \$45.

Ken Hall has written the first serious book-length study of John Woo. But the economics of publishing now dictate a much shorter book than previous ones by Tom Welsser and Gary Yoggy. However, although the 240 page-length has resulted in a limited treatment of Woo's pre-'94 films, Hall's concentrated approach does provide an insightful and well-researched exploration of the director's other work. Hall has done a thorough excavation using both well-documented sources and interviews with figures such as Woo, Terence Chang, Danny Lee, Lance Henriksen, Chuck Pfarrer and many others. At least two-thirds of the interviews were conducted directly while the remainder were by telephone (Joan Allen) or FAX (John Travolta).

Hall not only reveals Woo's familiarity with both Western and Chinese literary influences on the director especially *The Water Margin* and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* as well as the bushido code of samurai cinema but also reveals several surprises. The main influence on *The Killier* was not Melville's *Le Samourai* but a now-forgotten 1964 Tohei production *Narazumono*, starring Takakura Ken and Tetsura Tanba. Michael Mann's underrated *Manhunter* (1986) was also influential.

Hall reveals Woo deliberately translating his sources into new aesthetic combinations. Woo is no imitator like Tarantino but an intuitive artist reworking material into new exciting meanings. Despite concentrating on technical matters concerning *Hard Target* and *Face/Off*, Hall does reveal significant information such as Van Damme's inter-

ference on the first film and earlier screenplay drafts explaining Troy's character in the second. Although Van Damme refused to be interviewed for this book, Hall reveals that Woo earned the unqualified respect of the technicians on his first American film. This book is an indispensable pioneering work.

The Essential Guide to Deadly China Dolls. Ed. Lisa Baker. England: Eastern Heroes Ltd, 1996. 19.99 + 10 p&p Pounds Sterling. (For further information contact Eastern Heroes. P.O. Box 396, Richmond, Surrey, England. TW9 2YB. FAX: 011-44-181-288-7404. email: interactive@easternheroes.co.uk).

I'd hoped to review this work some years ago. But legal problems concerning distribution and reliable information involving this company's fate delayed this item. However, since Eastern Heroes have now moved into mail order I can write about this superb book.

Introduced by Rick Baker and subtitled "a guide to oriental bad girl cinema", this Baker/Toby Russell compilation is a real collector's item. Containing an enormous number of color and b/w stills, the text features brief articles and filmographies on everything you'd want to know about female Hong Kong movie heroines. Thirty-four pages are devoted to the predecessors of Moon Lee, Brigitte Lin, Anita Mui, and Rosamund Kwan revealing the roles of revered heroines such as Angela Mao Ying, Cheng Pei-pei, Helen Ma, Chan Bo Chu, Shih Szu, Polly Kwan and countless others. The reader can then appreciate how these talents paved the way for other diverse actresses such as Josephine Sui Fong-fong, Yukari Oshima, Michiko Nishiwaki, Joey Wong, and Karen Hui. Additional chapters cover Category 3 heroines.

The book desperately needs a good international distribution since it is one of the best things Eastern Heroes has produced.

While both Hong Kong and Japan produce action movies with females as the main lead, their approach is quite different. The heroines in most of Hong Kong's modern action epics could be rewritten (with very few changes) as male roles. Credit the Chinese filmmakers for blurring the gender gap better than anyone else. Japan, on the other hand, was and is more rigid. Hell, in Japan's early silent years all the female characters were portrayed by men. It's a tradition with roots in their Kabuki plays. I mention this because to this day Japan's action heroines are not usually on a par with their male counterparts (unless it is done purely as satire). Even the strongest of female leads will have a male character to answer to. Not so in the seemingly more liberal-minded culture that is (or at least was until 1997) modern Hong Kong. Of

course Japanese filming does have advantages. The general lack of toughness has afforded their female characters greater depth. Hong Kong's wushu women make for better fighters, but their Japanese counterparts make up for this with a quieter, more brooding style of intensity (though this could be due to a more repressed atmosphere on the film set, but I would just be speculating).

Now, this isn't meant as a knock to Hong Kong's actresses. It's just that the action-oriented scripts don't usually allow for much character growth.

The following is a short (and purely personal) list of my favorite singular female performances, as well as the defining moment in each film which made the performance so memorable. By no means is this supposed to encompass the entire action femme genre (that would be impossible in such a small space). But I feel each of these picks (be it for furious fighting, charisma or the projected image) captures the essence of what these divas are about. (Note: I have purposely avoided HK category III and Japanese pink starlets; that would require a different type of article altogether). My choices are not in order of preference.

Michiko
Nishiwaki



ASIA'S GREATEST ACTION DIVAS

SEVEN TOP TOP STARLETS CHOSEN BY JEFF GOODHARTZ

Lin Ching Hsia



LIN CHING HSIA

Golden Queens Commando

Lin Ching Hsia (aka Bridgette Lin, Venus Lin., etc) was – until her recent retirement – one of Hong Kong's best and most versatile actresses. For nearly twenty years she appeared in virtually every type of film. Be it art-house high-brow or low-brow (not to mention low budget) actioners, she's done them all. This film definitely falls under the latter category. The word "cockeyed" can't quite do it justice. Starting off as a women-in-prison film, it later shifts gear and becomes an all-female spaghetti western. Lin plays the crafty leader named Black Fox. Complete with an eye patch, she projects one of the most

memorable characters in all of Hong Kong cinema. Others may prefer her in *Peking Opera Blues* or *Bride With White Hair* (certainly both classier roles and better productions), but for me Black Fox character is her most unforgettable character. Truly a guilty pleasure.

Defining Moment: It's when Black Fox reveals who she really is to the rest of the gang. Any doubt that she's the one in control is then erased.



MEIKO KAJI

Alleycat Rock

Meiko Kaji was an extremely popular actress/singer in Japan during the seventies. Between 1970-1974 she starred

in three different, highly successful film series: **Alleycat Rock**, **Scorpion: Female Prisoner** (Joshu Satori) and **Lady Snowblood**. *Lady Snowblood 1* may have been her best overall film (if you haven't seen it, don't wait any longer, available through *Animego/Samurai Home Video*), but for me **Alleycat Rock** is her most memorable role. It helped that director **Yasuharu Hasebe** decked her and the co-stars out in the absolute coolest clothing imaginable (especially **Kaji's** cowboy hat). But even more than her attire was **Meiko Kaji's** performance. Her low-keyed posturing is impossible to forget once seen. Her character has little dialogue (akin to **Clint Eastwood's** *Man With No Name*) but her presence is so strong when she enters a room, everyone notices. And despite the film's increasingly grim story, **Kaji's** **Mako** remains the epitome of cool. **Defining Moment:** the final shot of **Alleycat Rock: Sex Hunter**. With both her boyfriend and fellow Alleycat gang members dead, **Mako** merely lowers her head allowing her black cowboy hat to cover her face as well as the screen. A supreme display of controlled cool.

HSIA KWAN LEE

Invincible Kung Fu Legs

Hsia Kwan Lee is something of an enigma. She has it all: she's good looking, she's an incredibly gifted leg fighter and she can act. But her film appearances are few. Arguably the best of her roles comes in this film; directed by the man who discovered her, **Lee Tso Nam**. She plays a spoiled brat fighter always causing trouble. And she plays it to perfection.

It's a real shame that she wasn't given more opportunities in bigger-budgeted productions during the late seventies and early eighties (her heyday) as she could have given any other kung fu lady a run for her money. She currently resides in her native Taiwan, occasionally acting in television dramas.



Defining Moment: The scene where **Hsia Kwan Lee** as the bratty **Phoenix** challenges four male bullies... and proves to be the biggest bully of all!



MICHIKO NISHIWAKI

My Lucky Stars

Rarely has so little screentime left such an impression. After appearing in a

couple of Japanese TV shows and at least one Nikkatsu sex film, **Sammo Hung** had the former bodybuilding champion imported to Hong Kong. She spoke little or no Chinese, so her part (not to mention dialogue) was minimal. But boy, did she ever leave an impact! Spending most of her time wrapped in a kimono, the seemingly demure lady disrobes (in preparing to battle Sibelle Hu) and reveals a heavily muscled physique (though somehow still looking feminine). It's one of those singular moments that can make a career. And Michiko took full advantage of it. Since this, she has had some memorably villainous roles (be it as assassin or seductress or sometimes both in many a Hong Kong film). But none matching the impact of of her initial, star-making moment in Sammo's comedy.

Defining Moment: The pose, of course. But also for the gambling scene where – upon recognizing the Lucky Stars – she casts a sinister gaze at each of them. This is enhanced by weird music and unusual camera angles which give her an almost otherworldly appearance.

YUKARI OSHIMA

Angel

Screen villainy at its most electrifying. Though **Outlaw Brothers** is arguably her finest film (as well as providing a three-dimensional role), **Angel** certainly gave **Yukari Oshima** the most distinct character of her career. As the dreaded Madam Yuen Lin, the Osh struts her way through each scene like a panther stalking its prey. The level of sadism from her character is shocking. Whether laughing maniacally while supervising a whipping of her prisoner or beating up her own men for a failure or (in the film's most uncomfortable sequence) filleting the male lead with a long needle (yeeowch!) this is one lady you wouldn't want to piss



off. And Oshima seems to tackle the part with glee, relishing every nasty moment. Her climactic battle with **Moon Lee** may be the best woman vs. woman battle you will ever see.

Defining Moment: After thoroughly trouncing the male lead, (while accidentally allowing his accomplice, played by **Elaine Liu** to escape) the Osh beams at the poor schmuck with one of the most intensely hateful stares in the history of movies. Its such an overpowering look that you actually feel fear for his character

JOYCE GODENZI

Eastern Condors

It was the career that almost wasn't. Godenzi (or **Go Lai Hung**, her Chinese name) hadn't considered a career in the spotlight until friends persuaded her to enter the Miss Hong Kong Beauty Pageant. Her exotic looks (she's half Australian) helped her win easily. After that, the offers came in for film parts. It was then that the wif-like Godenzi was



Joyce
Godenzi

approached by future husband Sammo Hung to co-star in his war-epic **Eastern Condors**. With no prior martial arts training, she put forth what may well be the single most unforgettable performance by an actress in Asian action cinema history. As a ferocious guerrilla fighter, her intensity was and still is unrivaled. In fact, so blistering is this performance that it makes most others appear positively tame. Although it could be attributed Sammo's selfless direction and guidance (having to teach her practically everything on the spot) the final credit must go to Godenzi herself. Nothing she's done since has come close to what she achieved in this film. Then again, how could anything?

Defining Moment: Tough to choose. Mrs. Hung had about a half-dozen defining moments in this film. The scene where Sammo chops her hand off quickly comes to mind because of her oh-so-realistic, cross-eyed look of intense pain coupled with a superhuman refusal to give up.

YOKO MINAMINO

Sukeban Deka

This was a difficult choice. Since having now seen all three Deka movies and

episodes from each series, I can see how each of the young lead actresses were able to leave their own indelible mark on the world of **Sukeban Deka**. But I initially saw 'movie one' in the series (back around 1991, without subtitles) and was absolutely mesmerized by Ms Minamino's performance. Her intense, moody style was a real eye-opener for me. She was even better (and punkier) in the TV series that preceded it. Yuki Saito (the first Deka girl) is reportedly the most popular among fans while Yui Asaka (the third Deka girl) was certainly the most vibrant and radiant. But Minamino was the 'deepest' (though still in a purely campy kind of way). As I understand it, she greatly disliked the whole Deka experience (a pity) and also retired from singing around 1993. She has done little screenwork and according to a website has recently played on a T.V. soap opera or two.

Defining Moment: During the climactic final battle against the killer cyborg in **Sukeban Deka: The Movie** when she reveals herself to be a member of Sukeban Deka. Her face and voice bear a remarkable degree of both hatred and an authoritative determination.



Yoko
Minamino

鬼 骨 場 (一)

HONG KONG X FILE

CASE OF THE UNFUNNY COMEDY

A PRESENTATION BY
GRAHAM R. LEWIS

I've got to hand it to director **Lee Kin Hing**. He saw an opportunity to somehow generate interest in a second-rate supernatural comedy and he took it. By titling his movie **The Hong Kong X-File**, he – like generations of exploitation filmmakers before him – found the perfect way to gather an audience: rip off the title of another pop culture phenomenon, in this case the alternately loved-and-hated American television show, **The X-Files**.

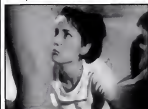
First, be aware that the only thing this film has in common with the television program is its title and an occasional vari-

ation of the TV show's famous theme song. Don't get me wrong – I'm not faulting the film for advertising itself in a misleading fashion, as such devices are part of the joys of exploitation cinema. Nor am I such a rabid **X-Files** fan (though I do enjoy the "mythology" episodes quite a bit) that I feel this movie has soiled something sacred. No, my beef with this film is it comes so close to being interesting and fun all by itself that one can't help but be disappointed when the sum of its parts ultimately fail to add up to something better.

The film opens during Hong Kong's *Ghost Festival*, a time of year, we're told, during which ghosts walk the earth and may physically interact with the likes of humans. The early scenes of a dozen or so ghosts playing pranks and stealing food from people on the city's streets are

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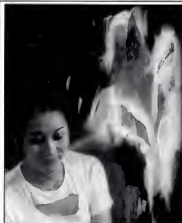
atmospheric as well as both chilling and funny. At this point I found myself eagerly awaiting the rest of the movie. Then we are introduced to our two heroes and the first scenes' promise is lost. Our heroes turn out to be two male cops, Miu (the goofy one) and Ben (the serious one). They are being demoted to Vice for sleeping through a drug raid on a local dealer. Almost immediately, Miu (played mostly in **Stephen Chow** fashion by actor **Bowie Lam**) begins his pathetically unfunny mugging and slapstick routines. His partner Ben (played stoically by **Diem Ly Trinh**) is sufficiently serious as Miu's straight man and, I suppose, the "Scully" of the pair.



The scene then switches back to the ghosts on the street and focuses upon one particular ghost, a beautiful female stalking a man as he enters a massage parlor/brothel. Through a quick flashback, we learn this man raped the woman (whom we now assume to be dead) and her ghost is, of course, bent on revenge. Just as she is about to attack him, she's repelled by Boss Keung, the owner of the brothel, who is also a black magic sorcerer using his powers to keep the brothel stocked with fresh young girls.

After a truly funny scene (there are a couple) of Boss Keung putting a "horny spell" on a new girl, we return to the beautiful ghost as she stalks another man elsewhere in the brothel. This time she is successful and proceeds to unceremoniously rip off his dick and toss it in the face of the "horny spellbound" young hooker. Then the beautiful ghost goes to another room and kills yet another john. Enter Miu and Ben to investigate the murders. Boss Keung seems to know what is going on, but, of course, won't cooperate with our heroes. Next follows a series of painfully unfunny slapstick scenes detailing how one of the whores





obtains a pubic hair from Miu and gives it to Boss Keung so he can control Miu's body in puppet-like fashion.

By the time director Lee Kin Hing returns to the film's real story, I barely cared about what was actually going on. Still, the plot is explained this way: the beautiful ghost is a woman named May whose husband "gave" her (against her will) to Boss Keung and his men in return for a faulted debt. Under the command of Keung's main thug, Brother Watson, the men beat and rape May until she was comatose. Even in such a state, May's rage keeps her body alive and enables her to send her "astral body" forth to gain revenge on her attackers. If handled well, this storyline could have been a decent, horrific reflection of very similar *X-Files* plotlines. Unfortunately, the intrusion of lame comedy – as tends to be the curse of many Hong Kong films – destroys any chance of building psychological or physical tension.

In a later developed subplot, Miu and Ben save another whore from May's fate, and this woman (Mui) becomes an hon-

orary member of the team and a love interest for Miu (Miu and Mui, get it? Pretty funny, huh?). Mui feels guilty because she saw what Keung's men were doing to May, but did nothing to help her. The addition of this character and subplot does help the film become slightly more interesting, and it also shifts the focus from the Abbott and Costello-like relationship between Miu and Ben to the only slightly less-clichéd relationship between Miu and Mui, but – sadly – it's a case of too little arriving too late.

The best scenes in the film come toward the end when May and another sorcerer (posing as May's doctor) face off with Keung in an all-out magic duel that at its finest conjures memo-

ries of the **Chinese Ghost Story** trilogy (not to mention the cult fave **Beauty Evil Rose**) and its many imitators. However, these scenes also are far too short and culminate in a happy ending that is not only ridiculous but sickeningly sweet as well. I suppose what bothers me most about this movie is the fact that there are enough hints throughout suggesting it could have been a fun and scary flick. The cinematography and art direction are excellent, employing interesting camera angles and a wonderful palette of color motifs. Obviously, there was a bit of money spent on this production. It's too bad (and too obvious) that none of it went to a clever writer for a good script.

I often greatly enjoy Asian films that mix horror and comedy (**Ching Siu Tung's** above-mentioned trilogy, **Sammo Hung's Encounters Of The Spooky Kind**, etc.) and seldom mind even the retarded mugging Stephen Chow or Jackie Chan, which fans seem to love so much. But here it simply distracts the viewer from enjoying the good points of a movie.



a column by Max Allan Collins

FOREIGN CRIMES

Speaking of "Foreign Crimes," the Miramax release of *Princess Mononoke* has been limited to a relative handful of American screens. Is this any way to treat Japan's highest-grossing movie (\$150 million plus), the winner of that country's Academy Award for Best Film? Surely Miramax has underestimated the potential of this modern classic from animator *Hayao Miyazaki*, the *Disney of Japan*, after all, the *Disney Company* – Miramax's owner – ought to know how to market a masterpiece of animation.

Not that the English-language version of *Princess Mononoke* doesn't have its flaws. A few of the celebrity voices are fine – in particular *Gillian Anderson* – but most are adequate at best, and ridiculous at worst: *Billy Bob Thornton's* Southern-fried accent is an example of the casual, Miramax Frat Party approach to the dubbing of this movie, as is the choice of *Quentin Tarantino's* favorite comic-book writer, *Nell Gaiman*, to write the English screenplay. Gaiman does an adequate job, though the screenplay does suffer from occasionally stilted dialogue and the writer's typically humorless, grandiose approach.

These are quibbles, however, and have little to do with *Princess Mononoke's* relegation to arthouse status. *Princess Mononoke's* problem is that it has the gall to be an animated fea-

ture with complex characterizations, adult themes and no cute characters singing and dancing. Starting with *Snow White*, Disney has so narrowly defined the animated feature that *Princess Mononoke* seemingly has no place in the American movie marketplace.

This is not because *Princess Mononoke* is so innately Japanese that cultural differences confound American audiences; in fact, Miyazaki's feature is rooted in American popular culture, particularly the comic strips of the '30s and '40s and the animation they spawned. *Fleischer Studios'* great success, the *Popeye* cartoons, flowed from *E C Segar's* classic comic strip, and that same studio's influential '40s *Superman* cartoons came from the *Shuster/Siegel* comic. *Mononoke's* dark buffoon, *Jiko Bou*, mirrors *Popey's* rival *Bluto*, and its fluid animation recalls the *Fleischer Superman*.

Hayao Miyazaki has obviously been a student since childhood of classic American cartoons and comics, working for a Japanese audience that accepts anime and manga as viable narrative forms appropriate to readers of all ages. *Princess Mononoke* is matter of fact in its sophisticated attitudes, presenting an animated world that has elements of both violence and sex, even though the film's audience is intended to include kids as well as adults. Miyazaki clearly feels that

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a child can appreciate both beautiful images and grotesque ones, in the context of a meaningful story.

In *Princess Mononoke* developing industrialization is threatening the forest and the creatures therein. Rather than make the animals good and the humans bad – or the other way around – *Princess Mononoke* shows the good and the bad on both sides of the conflict; and it does so with brutality and poetry, tragedy and whimsy – a palate of emotional colors to rival anything in its own vivid, yet understated earth-tones animation.

Since the '20s, the Japanese have appreciated comic books and for generations have embraced comics as vital story-telling medium. In America – with occasional, often avant-garde exceptions – comics (and animated cartoons) are considered inherently childish.

That is why *Princess Mononoke* – as mainstream a movie to Japanese audiences as *Beauty And The Beast* is to American ones – has been doomed to independent-style distribution and in the sad context of our popular culture, Disney has made the right decision. What else could they do, after decades of training Americans to mindlessly categorize animated

features as cuddly, cute, sing-dancing "family fare?"

The Japanese appreciation of American popular culture frequently turns up in their genre fare, fascinatingly so in the "Maiku Hama" series, a trilogy of films from director *Kaizo Hayashi* (of *Zipang* fame). These private-eye moves are homages to *Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer* ("Maiku Hama" is the way the detective's name appears in Japanese translations of the Spillane novels) and – as Spillane's biographer and sometime partner on various writing projects – I have long been curious about these movies, which were written up in *Tom and Yuko Weisner's Japanese Cinema: The Essential Handbook*. I recently had the opportunity to see the first of these, *The Worst Day Of My Life* (1994)

Princess Mononoke



Princess Mononoke



– the title of which is a take-off on the American film *The Best Years Of Our Lives* (1946).

Can I assume everyone in the Asian Cult Cinema audience has at least a nodding acquaintance with Mickey Spillane? Spillane's first batch of Mike Hammer novels – starting with *I, the Jury* (1947) through *Kiss Me, Deadly* (1952) – were sensations, selling millions of copies, and – because of their strong sex and sadism (by the standards of the times) earned Spillane a notorious reputation. One of the most popular and yet vilified writers in American history, Spillane also is one of the most successful overseas, for many years the only living writer on the list of top five most widely translated authors.

Japan is one of the many countries where Spillane's books were (are) huge bestsellers. Mickey once told me he presented a Japanese businessman, who at a book-signing had admired one of Mickey's own Hammer-style fedoras, with that very hat; according to Mickey, the businessman went back to Japan and did

two things: placed the fedora in a lighted glass display case, and started sending Mickey endless boxes of electronic goods.

Judging by the first in the series, the *Maiku Hama* films both understand and honor Spillane's famous detective series; but Hayashi's series is no rip-off: his detective hero, a young ex-streetgang member (well-played by **Masatoshi Nagase**), repeatedly explains to clients and others, who react to his familiar name, that Maiku Hama is his "real name."

Worst Day is an odd, oddly effective amalgam of genre homage and slice of life. Maiku Hama dresses retro-40s style, and his office is in the projection booth of a revival-house movie theater. He has an uneasy relationship with a police detective that is right out of a typical B-detective movie; a taxi-cab driving buddy is a typical genre-style sidekick, and the private eye's young sister is similarly broadly played and written. Additionally, Hama is motivated by friendship – like Mike Hammer, who frequently is seeking revenge for the death of a friend – and is capable of dishing out, and taking, Spillane-style violence. Also, Hayashi's *Worst Day* is in black-and-white, with shots and angles that occasionally invoke **Robert Aldrich's** classic Spillane adaptation, *Kiss Me Deadly*.

Where *Worst Day* differs from Spillane – and a strict genre piece – is the intrusion of real life upon the narrative. This is a detective who is clearly, consciously trying to emulate his genre hero; but his streetgang past threatens to catch up with him, and other real life elements – racial hatred between Taiwanese and Japanese, in particular – make Maiku Hama's life much less tidy than Mike Hammer's, if no less violent. *Worst Day* lacks the satisfying finale a Spillane tale always offers, the bad guys dying and Hammer, perhaps wounded in the effort, triumphing. The conclusion of *Worst Day* is somber and bittersweet at best.



WHO WAS THAT MASKED MAN?

The Making Of KAMEN RIDER

an article by
AUGUST RAGONE

The *Kamen Rider* teleseries were produced by *Toei Tokyo Productions*, responsible for scores of fantasy/sci/horror over the years. The staff of *Toei* really forged massive effort to wildly go beyond the old boundaries of the usual genre programs in Japan. In other words, *Kamen Rider* was a very unusual product of the Japanese television industry. This article takes a look at the stream in planning this teleseries to see how it all came about.

1971 heralded what became known as the 2nd *Monster Boom* in Japan. It brought forth the premiere of *P-Productions'* *Space Simian Gori* (aka *Spectreman*) and *Tsuburaya Productions'* *Return Of Ultraman*. Although

both shows (with their mix of small screen giant monsters and heroes) were ratings winners across the archipelago, no one expected the astounding influence and overwhelming popularity that was to be seized by a modest-budgeted superhero entry from *Toei TV Productions* – especially since there were no giant monsters. No one was more surprised by the nation-wide phenomenon that this show would create in its wake, than the staff and crew of *Kamen Rider* themselves.

Kamen Rider (or more direct translation, *Masked Rider*) has become one of the most durable and popular superhero teleseries ever produced, creating a fall-out which spawned the *Henshin Boom*

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(henshin, or "transformation" or "metamorphosis") of 1972, and ushered in the Golden Age of Japanese Fantasy Television (resulting in more than fifty imitations and spin-offs from Toei and a myriad of other production companies and networks).

The series **Kamen Rider** follows in the tradition of Japan's early human-sized television superheroes (**Moonlight Mask**, **National Kid**, **Spectral Mask**, etc.), and is cast from the same mold, except for two unusual elements: the hero is an "altered-human," a cyborg; and his guise is reflective of the symbol of his strength – a locust, or grasshopper. These two factors are what separate **Kamen Rider** from all which came before it.

The basic plot of **Kamen Rider** follows its hero through his struggle against a subversive, evil secret society (bent on world domination) who have endowed him, against his will, with megalomaniacal abilities. Astride his super-powered motorcycle, our hero transforms from human to battle-form – **Kamen Rider** – in order to defeat the monstrous altered-humans and mutant cyborgs, sent by the secret society to kill him. On the surface, the story may seem to be your typical "Good vs Evil" scenario, but the series adds twists and complexities to basic character foundations – with inner/outer conflicts added to the story, and the unforeseen real-life trials and tribulations forced upon the series' staff, which created the need for unconventional script changes.

These factors forged **Kamen Rider** into a series of unlimited horizons and unprecedented formats, setting new standards for the coming generation of Japanese superhero dramas.

When the initial **Kamen Rider** series concluded in 1973, Toei soon followed with a string of spin-offs: **Kamen Rider V3** (**Kamen Raida Buisud**, 1973-1974), **Kamen Rider X** (**Kamen Raida Ekusu**, 1974), **Kamen Rider Amazon** (**Kamen Raida Amazon**, 1974), and **Kamen**

Rider Stronger (**Kamen Raida Sutoronga**, 1975). After **V3**, Toei found it difficult to maintain ratings and keep the spark that blessed the first two (and best) series. In 1975, the series was given a rest.

In 1979, due to renewed interest in the program, Toei gave birth to **New Kamen Rider** (**Shin Kamen Raida** aka **Sky Rider**) and **Kamen Rider Super-1** (**Kamen Raida Suppa-wan**, 1980) – but, fell to the wayside in the burgeoning "Anime Boom" of the time. It was several more years before the likes of **Kamen Rider Black** (**Kamen Raida Burakku**, 1987-1988) and **Kamen Rider Black-RX** (**Kamen Raida Burakku Aru-ekusu**, 1988-1989). While the former reached new heights, the latter was poorly executed, and a third season failed to materialize.

Of course, you cannot keep a good superhero down, and our heroes returned in new forms and incarnations with TV specials (such as 1984's **All Members Assemble! The Birth Of Kamen Rider #10**) and original features **The True Kamen Rider** (**Shin Kamen Raida**, 1992), **Kamen Rider Zo** (**Kamen Raida Zetto-Oh**, 1993), and **Kamen Rider J** (**Kamen Raida Jei**, 1994).

Even now, in wake of the new Millennium, Toei is introducing an all-new TV series: **Kamen Rider KuG...** and the legend continues. But, before we can look into the future, we must cast our eyes to the past, where it all began: the year is 1969 ..

*

Kamen could be considered a cult TV series in a certain sense, as well as an ambitious project undertaken by Toei Tokyo Studios and *Mainichi Broadcasting of Osaka*. It began with the gathering of filmmakers from Toei, creative producer Tohru Hirasawa (*Giant Robo*), writers Shinichi Ishikawa (*Ultra Seven*), Shozo Uehara (*Return Of Ultraman*) and Masaru Igami (*The Samurai*). Two years of planning passed before the actual series started broadcasting on air. In order to create a new

Kamen Rider: Sky Rider

hero for the next generation, they discussed passionately about the new age of heroes and the image they should have. All of them conceded on the basis of a superhero who dons a mask, as they felt the time of the "masked hero" was going to sweep Japan again, and that they needed, inevitably, to create a masked hero.

Comic artist and character designer **Shotaro Ishimod** (nee Ishinomori) agreed strongly with these opinions. The ideas conceived by Ichikawa especially impressed Ishimod, because Ichikawa himself was the individual who really had a great interest in the concept of a hero who hides behind a mask – and because he wanted to create sf stories and dramas that maintained a great level of quality. Ichikawa was also

especially interested in the persona of this hero. Of course, Hirayama had no objections on the matter.

Originally, this plan was suggested by the *Mainichi Broadcasting Company*, as the network really desired a new type of hit show. Joining the planning team at Toei were several members from Mainichi Broadcasting: organization chief **Koichi Hirose**, film department leader **Itaru Atsuno** and film department chief **Yoshiteru Inno**. They were accompanied by Toei Tokyo's chief of TV and scenarion departments, **Ryotoku Watanabe**. Together, these talented film people put their best efforts forward to create an entirely new hero series.

In 1970, the first plan they had developed was **Maskman K** (*Masukuman Kei*).

This was a concept which involved a "hard sports" angle, with emphasis on action scenes. At the time, the sports genre was extremely popular in Japan



(*Aim For The Ace!*, *The Sign Is V*, etc.), and the hero's name in this draft was *Takeshi Kyo*. He was taught the skills of hand-to-hand combat and patriotism by his father, and the original plot was the battle against 'Shocker,' who attempts an invasion of Japan through economics. The name *Shocker* was already present in the first planning stages, and this evil organization would be destroyed by the end of the 1st Chapter (or 13 episodes). In the original plan, a new secret organization(s) would appear for the next conflict(s).

The abilities of this masked hero were nothing compared to a superhero; he was more akin to the previous Toei heroes such as *Captain Ultra* (Kyaputen Urutora, 1967) and *Spectral Mask* (1960-1961). The creative team wanted this hero to suffer mortal pains, then train himself relentlessly in order to combat the forces of evil. Also, in this 1st draft, the hero – to achieve the image of an everyman – is a physical education teacher at a junior high school. This was emphasized so he would lead a life similar to the average man.

"Masks have been in existence for almost as long as the human race. When someone wears a mask, his or her true nature is transformed into something different. Imagine if you had a completely different character inside of yourself which could emerge as a real person to solve your problems. Could anything be more wonderful than this? Masks suggest great, unknown powers to the audience. A mask can embody the audience's emotions. In this new project we are trying to find a completely original way to look at the masked hero."

—from the original treatment for *Maskman K*, whose elements can still be found in the resultant *Kamen Rider* teleseries.

The next version was *Masked Angel* (Masuku Engeeru). The basic plot was much closer to the image of *Kamen*

Rider. At this point in the planning, the hero's name was settled and remained *Takeshi Hongo*. In this story, Hongo was drawn as a fugitive, arrested and charged in the murder of his mentor, Professor Midodkawa. The crime was frame-up by an evil secret organization, led by sinister industrialist Taizo Ishigami, who wants to steal the patent rights for Professor Midodkawa's inventions to grab the profits from them.

To achieve that end, he wants to dispose of Hongo and tries to kill him. Hongo grants the patents to the professor's daughter Michiru and son Masao, so he fights with the evil Ishigami, his fellow conspirators and mutant minions, while looking after Midodkawa's children. The drama begins ten years after a terrible accident, wherein Hongo was electrocuted by three million volts – thus enabling him with super-human powers. He trains to improve them. And then, donning a mask, Hongo becomes the *Masked Angel* to protect Midodkawa's children from the deadly clutches of Ishigami. The plan's theme was occultish action and *Naniwabushi* humanism – the beauty of self-sacrifice.

The third planning stage was *Cross Mask* (Juji Kamen) or *Cross Fire* (Kurosu Fuaiya) – the next step in terms of story development – and is almost identical to *Masked Angel*, except for certain details in character and situation: i.e., 10 years ago at the University of California, Hongo and Professor Midodkawa competed a new device with which Hongo was accidentally electrocuted. He was saved in the nick of time by Midodkawa, who unfortunately loses his life. The sinister Claude Kurohara swears a twisted verbal testimony against Hongo who then becomes a fugitive. Kurohara was a member of the *Shocker* organization, a company desirous of the intention due to their plans of taking over the world. However, Midodkawa's children believe that Hongo was in fact responsible for their father's death – so, in times of crisis – Hongo must don the mask of

Cross Fire to save the Midodkawas from the evil of Shocker.

The symbol of Hongo's fate, is a red bruise in the shape of a cross. It appears when he becomes enraged. Cross Fire's abilities are about the same as that of the Masked Angel, but more action scenes are emphasized. The highlight scene for each episode would include autobike action with serious special effects, coupled with exaggerated fight scenes similar to that of professional wrestling. The staff even included ideas of direction: when the hero becomes angry, they wanted to incorporate fire and smoke into those scenes. Actually, it seems, at this point in the planning, the character designs were completed. The series was shaping up quite well, and was almost ready for production.

"The mask and costume which he wears only in combat, are based on motorcyclists, and are designed to be both fashionable and flexible, for the action scenes. The mask is basically a combination of a helmet, goggles and a mouth-covering. The color is to be basically white or beige (Looking very much like Moonlight Mask from the 1950s)."

— from the plan for *Cross Fire*.

The planning staff had also created Gonbei Todo — a new character added to the story as an assistant to the hero. Meanwhile, Mainichi Broadcasting almost accepted this draft, and the title was changed officially to *Cross Mask*.

In the various working drafts, we can clearly see the casting which was pencilled in by the staff: As for *Maskman K*, the hero would be played by Jiro Chiba (the brother of Shinichi "Sonny" Chiba) or Seishiro Kametshi (*Zero Squad Black Cloud*), and the father of the hero would be played by Hideo Takamatsu. For *Masked Angel*, Masaomi Kondo (known for his role in the popular Toei teleseries *Judo Ichokusen*) in the role of Takeshi Hongo, and Yoko Shimada (famous for *Shogun*) as Rudko Midodkawa. Both actors were contacted

regarding the roles. Also slated for parts were Ryo Hoshikawa as Masao Midorikawa, Fuyukichi Maki (from *The Samurai*) as Detective Tsudo, and Eiro Takamatsu as Gonbei Todo. At the time of this draft, Toei was producing the tele-series *Straight Ahead Judo* (*Judo Ichokusen*), a huge hit which had major influences on *Kamen Rider*'s early casting ideas.

Under the title *Cross Fire*, writer Masaru Igami (*Moonlight Mask, Red Shadow, The Masked Ninja*, et al) penned the first scenario: *Mystery! Man-Spider!* (Kaiki Gumo-Otoko), based on the synopsis from the current drafts. Not much had changed in terms of story-structure, however the name of the hero's confidant was changed from Gonbei Todo to Tober Tachibana. Also, it became established that the Man-Spider was the first *kaiju* (weird man or mutant) of the Shocker organization, but this *kaiju* was a *kaizo ningen* (altered human or cyborg) which was a new idea to the genre — rather than simply employing the clichéd evil aliens from outer space, or... plain, twisted criminals. In 1966, two Toei films directed by Hajime Sato, *Golden Bat* (*Ogon Batto*) and *Terror Beneath The Sea* (*Kaitei Dai-Senso*), introduced very progressive images of *kaizo ningen* to their audiences. So, the enemy Shocker's mutants were firmly established as altered humans — created by the evil organization itself — and these characters would be easily understood by the television audience.

A screenplay examination with the staff followed. This resulted in a decision ordering Igami to rewrite under the title, *Masked Rider X* (*Kamen Raida Ekusu*). The new script was very similar to that of *Cross Fire*, though Man-Spider doesn't die at the conclusion; rather, he returns in episode #2. The synopsis of the second episode tells of the fight with Man-Spider, with emphasis on the hero's special physical training and his increasing abilities. Hongo was now *Mr X*, a mysterious professional bowler (as in ten-pin



bowling). The world of *Cross Fire* was completed, but the staff still wasn't completely satisfied with this draft, so they forged ahead to expand the dimensions of the current script.

At the start of 1971, the fifth was devised by Toei, under the title *Skullman* (Sukaruman) – later called *Skullman: The Masked Rider* (Kamen Riada Sukaruman). Thrust on the staff with passion by Shotaro Ishimod, the very idea was based on Ishimod's own original comic of the same name (featured in issue #3 of *Weekly Shonen Magazine*, 1/11/70). As suggested by the title, this featured a motorcycle rider who wore a skull-shaped mask, symbolic of the true figure of the human body.

The rest of the plot was almost identical to *Cross Fire*: In order to conquer the world, Shocker creates an army of cyborgs. The minions of Shocker attempt anything to disrupt the modern world. The mutants kidnap, extort, protect corrupt industrialists, destroy factories and laboratories, etc.

Shocker was emphasized as a *social/evil* and Skullman represented *humanity*. Shocker was a subversive organization – unknown to world – in an image of an evil deeply hidden under a web of secrecy. Only an evil voice would be heard by the audience, and this voice orders the battle-mutants to do it's bidding. Shocker's mutants are altered physically and spiritually to become evil (ugly), with masks or not.

Meanwhile, hero Skullman was coming closer to the completed image of *Kamen Rider*, due to several key changes. He is now a former assistant at "R" University's bio-science research center. The hero himself is a cyborg – altered by Shocker – but with his will still free, he dons a mask to battle the villains. He can absorb more power through wind and water pressure, to become invincible, and is equipped with a futuristic, push-button motorcycle, instead of an ordinary motorbike. Skullman battles Shocker, although he is in great psychological pain, due to the realization that his body has been permanently altered by them.

At first, Ruriko believes that Hongo killed her father, but later she discovers the truth and becomes his ally. The father figure of Tobei Tachibana (also an aid to Hongo) shows up as the owner of a coffee shop. These two important characters were firmly established, and the screenplay was almost near completion. This plot became the very backbone of *Kamen Rider*, but at this point the staff didn't believe they could come up with a different mutant-of-the-week, so two-to-three episodes would be dedicating to fighting one mutant, and also the show was still emphasizing its horror format.

Ruriko's brother Masao was dropped, because the character was deemed unnecessary for the format and atmosphere. Also, it was determined that Hongo would no longer be pursued by the police, so the character of Detective Tsudo was dropped, too.

When Ishimod began designing the

new Skullman, he changed the image from 'hero' to that of a motorcycle rider. The entire staff then agreed to the character design based on the image of a grasshopper. At the time, Ishmod drafted scores of designs, and his son Jo Onodera (who was five years old) picked the design based on a grasshopper. So, the hero's image was finally decided, and his name was changed to *Hopper King*.

From this point on, the project was called *Hopper King: The Masked Rider*

(*Kamen Raidoh Hoppa Kingu*), but everyone on the staff agreed the title was just too long, so it became simply **Kamen Rider**.

By the way, this character design – based on a grasshopper – was very innovative at the time. There was nothing like it before on any TV show in Japan, even on programs designed for young people. Of course, the network executives were a little bit concerned about breaking new ground with an untried

hero concept. But, in the face of sheer zeal from the Toei staff, the Mainichi Broadcasting decided to take a chance. And so, for the first time in the history of Japanese television, a hero with mechanical beauty, a hero of mystery and horror – **Kamen Rider** – was born.

Around this time (near the end of 1970), the network requested a meeting with the editor-in-chief of *Shonen Magazine* (Boy's Magazine) to discuss promotion for the new series. A decision was made to begin running a comic-book version of **Kamen Rider**. The new comic appeared in *Bokura Magazine* (We Magazine), a weekly, on 4/12/71. Unfortunately, this magazine was subsequently cancelled. The comic was transplanted to *Weekly Boy's Magazine* (5/30/71), with the title **Cobra-man Rises Again!** (*Cobura-otoko*



Yomigaeta!). This installment – for which Ishimod drew 40 pages – became a hit (visually, the comic has a strong cinematic sense, like that of a storyboard, with considerable impact). In this version of the story, Tobei Tachibana was the Hongo family butler, and Takeshi was a millionaire with a secret headquarters under his mansion – not unlike America's **Batman**. For this story, he wore a mask to hide the marks that appear on his face when he becomes enraged, a concept previously developed for **Masked Angel**. Kamen Rider 2 was an assassin, who helped to kill Takeshi before regaining his memory and joining in the fight against Shocker. Takeshi was able to return – in an android body – for the final battle.

On New Year's Day 1971, Mainichi Broadcasting held a staff conference, and decided to release the show on April 3, 1971. They made decisions in casting. **Hiroshi Fujioka** was chosen to take the role of Takeshi Hongo, instead of **Massami Kondo**. Fujioka was a New-Face actor from the Shochiku movie company. Fujioka had joined Shochiku in 1964, and appeared in his first film **The Camellia Is The Flower Of Love** (Anko No Ai-Hana, 1965), a big part for the young actor. Next, he landed a featuring role in **X From Outer Space** (Uchu Dai-Kaiju Gilaia, 1967) and **The Little Cafe** (Chisana Sunaku). He had been primed as a young hopeful for Shochiku, but Fujioka went freelance in 1969, and became a regular on Toei's cop TV series **Gold Eye** (Gonudo Ai). The decision to hire Fujioka to play Kamen Rider was based on this role.

Also, the role of heroine Ruriko Midorikawa was changed from **Yoko Shimada** to **Chieko Maki** (later to be featured as a pivotal character in **Senkosha's Iron King** TV series). This decision was made because they believed Shimada's image was perceived as 'too quiet and obedient.' Maki was chosen because of her 'intensity' (even though she was still attending uni-

versity at the time, she had appeared in several TV commercials which caught the producers' eyes). Shimada was placed in the role of Ruriko's best friend, Hiromi Nohara, who appeared through episode #25.

Finally, the role of Tobei Tachibana was given to **Akiji Kobayashi**. It was the wish of creative producer Hirayama that his long-time friend Kobayashi be given the part. Hirayama really liked Kobayashi's good-natured personality – and his attitude towards programs for young people – so Hirayama lobbied for him and that wish became reality. Kobayashi is famous for his roles in the **Ultra Series** for **Tsuburaya Productions**, especially **Ultraman** (Urutoraman, 1966), in which Kobayashi plays Captain Muramatsu, the fatherly commander of the Science Patrol.

In the beginning, **Kamen Rider** was shot under the most harrowing of conditions: the staff could not shoot at the already overcrowded Tokyo studios in Otsumi, so the staff had to use the facilities at Ikuta Studios in Kanagawa Prefecture (an hour south of Tokyo). **Yusaku Uchida** was appointed as the production chief, and the crew decided to begin shooting the series right away. As for the action scenes, the members of the **Ono Ken Yuka!** pulled out all the stops, after their success on the **Straight Ahead Judo** teleseries. The art director was **Rikuo Migami** (currently with his own **Cosmo Productions**, but at the time he was employed by **Ekisu Productions**).

Unfortunately, Ikuta Studios had minimal equipment in those days – they only had one electric stove for heating! But, the zeal of the staff and cast eventually overcame the hardships. After many more twists and turns, great difficulties and numerous complications, the series would be ready for its premiere. It would literally be another two years.

But the show went on...

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